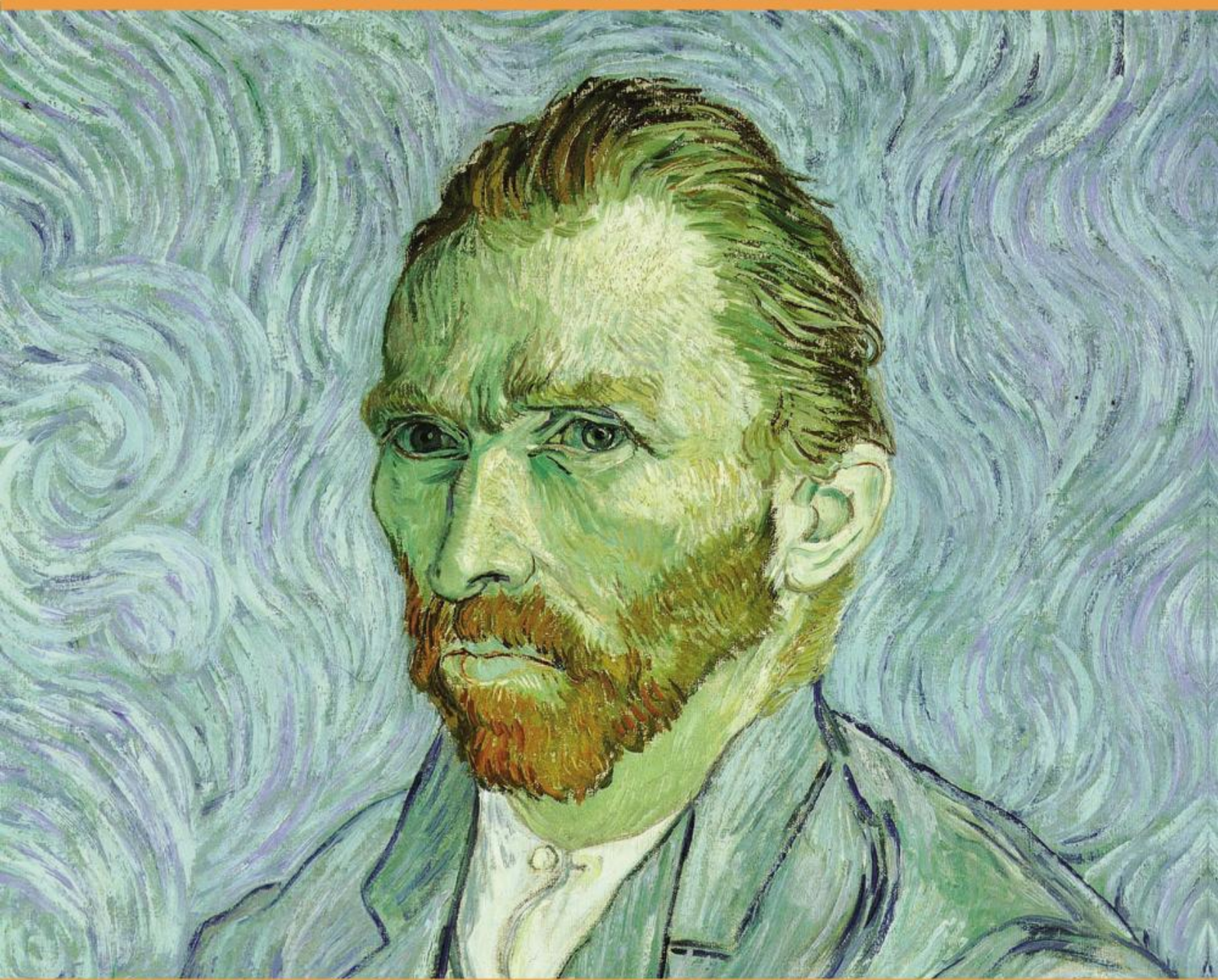
THROUGH THE EYES OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

SELECTED DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS
BY THE GREAT MASTER



WITH ACCOMPANYING TEXT BY BARRINGTON BARBER

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With accompanying text by Barrington Barber and introductions by Charlotte Gerlings



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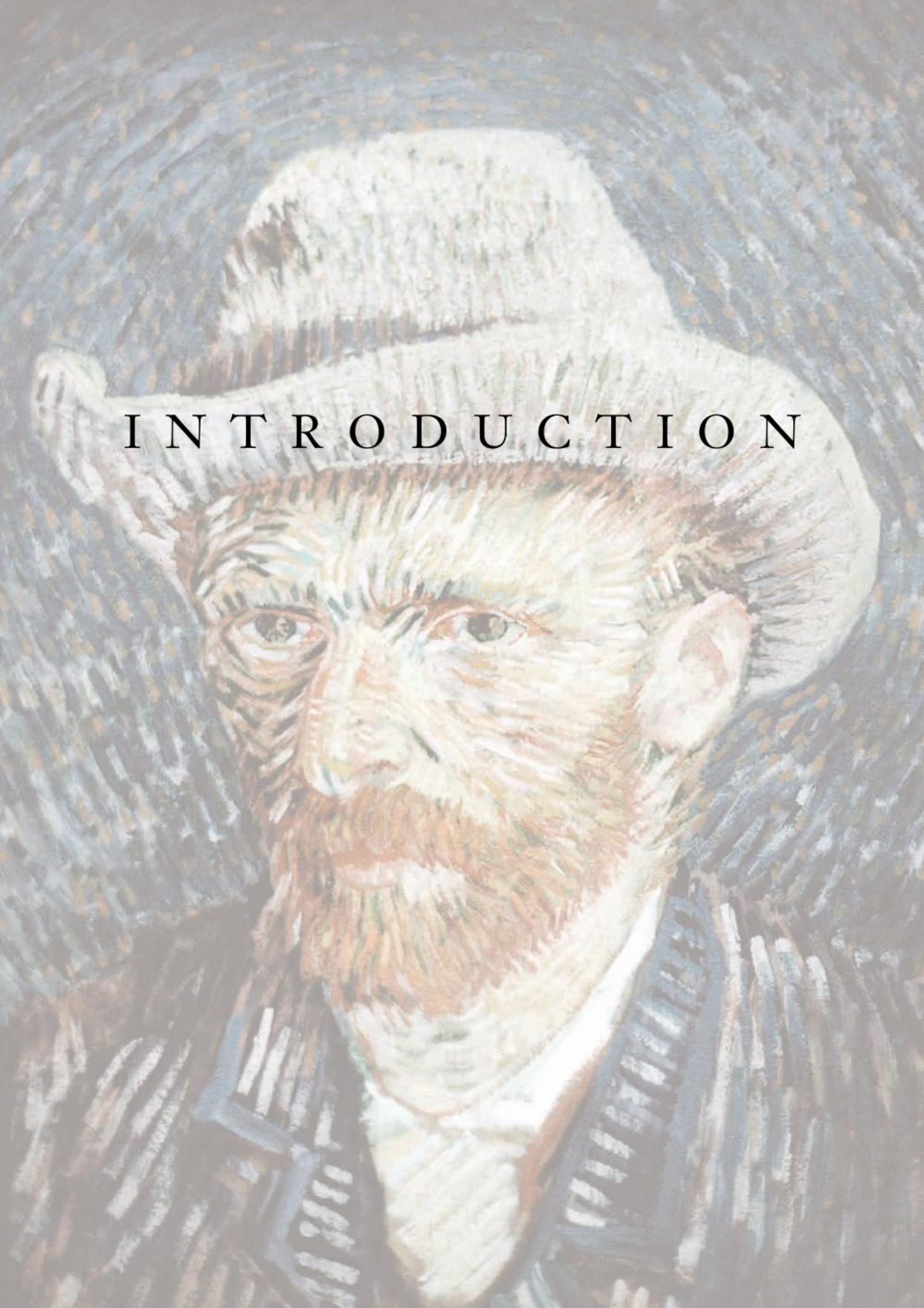
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CONTENTS

	Introduction	**6**
1	Early Efforts	**16**
2	Working Life	**32**
3	Artistic Influences	**48**
4	Sun and the South	**64**
5	Intimate Surroundings	**84**
6	Outdoor Idylls	**100**
7	People Up Close	**126**
8	Still Life	**150**
9	Intimations of Mortality	**170**



INTRODUCTION

One of the most potent names in art, Vincent van Gogh takes his place in the roll-call of famous artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Pablo Picasso. Sunflowers, starry nights, a severed ear and suicide: he is an irresistible example of tortured genius.

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853 in Groot-Zundert, in the Brabant region of the Netherlands. He was one of seven children born to Theodorus van Gogh (1822–85), a Dutch Reformed Church pastor, and Anna Cornelia Carbentus (1819–1907), the daughter of a bookbinder.

Two brothers and three sisters followed; all survived, an older sibling having died. Theodorus (Theo), Van Gogh's favourite and closest friend, was four years his junior. Of his sisters, Van Gogh loved Willemina (Wil) best, although the age gap was nine years. The young Vincent was: 'intensely serious and uncommunicative, and walked around clumsily, in a daze with his head hung low.' Van Gogh himself admitted to a rather sombre childhood, although he loved roaming the fields, heathland and pine forests around their home.

Despite his awkwardness he was a clever student and, in July 1869, the boy travelled to The Hague to become a junior clerk at Goupil and Company, art dealers with branches in London, Paris and Brussels. His Uncle Vincent was a share-holding partner in the firm and helped secure him the position. Goupil exhibited and dealt in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art, as well as reproductions of the old masters. Young Van Gogh was quick to observe the styles of various painters, at the same time learning to value their work from a dealer's point of view. However, the commercial aspect bothered him; he complained to his sister Wil that only 'one-tenth of all business that is transacted is really done out of belief in the art'.

In May 1873, Van Gogh came to England on a two-year transfer to Goupil's London branch. Their stock consisted mostly of prints and photographic reproductions but consignments of paintings soon began to arrive for Van Gogh's attention.

Van Gogh went to the London galleries when he could. Although unfamiliar with English painting, he particularly liked Constable and had some regard for Turner, Reynolds, Gainsborough and Bonington, and the contemporary artists Millais and Boughton.

In late August, Van Gogh found lodgings at 87 Hackford Road, Brixton. His landlady, Ursula Loyer ran a small school on the premises with her daughter Eugenie.

Around this time, Theo announced that he was to join Goupil at The Hague branch. Van Gogh's first letter to him of 1874 contained a long list of recommended artists; he had become particularly keen on the realism of Millet's peasant pictures, also Breton, Corot and Mauve.

Yet, deep down he was not happy, and that summer his parents found him 'thin, silent, dejected – a different being'. Van Gogh had recently taken up drawing in England and filled much of his holiday – and a small sketchbook – with landscapes.

Goupil's clients shrank from the forthright opinions of the young Dutchman, who would pass unsolicited judgement on their choices. So Van Gogh was removed to the Paris branch for the last three months of 1874, and Christmas was spent with the family at his father's parsonage in Helvoirt.

He went back to London in the new year and, although he had behaved outrageously – telling Goupil that their trade was no better than organized theft – they granted him another chance in Paris, thanks once more to the influence of Uncle Vincent.

However, after Christmas 1875, spent at his father's new parsonage in Etten, Van Gogh was summoned to the Paris office and informed that his employment would end on 1 April 1876.

Theo suggested he might start again and study painting. However, Van Gogh revealed that he was going *au pair* as a teacher at a boarding school in Ramsgate, England.



Whilst there, Van Gogh sent an enterprising letter to a clergyman whose church he had attended while in London. The letter stressed his experience of travelling among different people, as well as his 'innate love of the church'.

By July 1876, Van Gogh had



moved to Isleworth, a village west of London, and to the home of the Reverend Thomas Slade-Jones. For board, lodging and a modest salary, Van Gogh would combine teaching a few boys with assisting the Methodist minister. Throughout the autumn term, the Reverend Jones allowed Van Gogh to speak at prayer meetings.

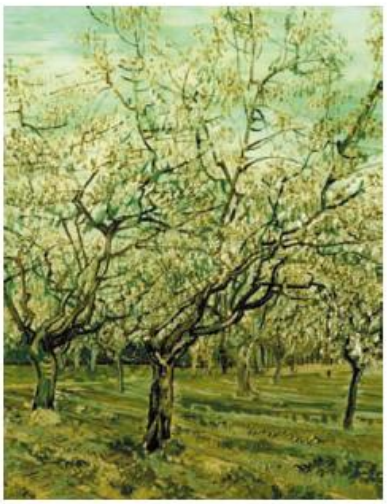
But despite modelling himself on his father, Van Gogh was not an impressive preacher and by December 1876 his career in England was over. In Etten that Christmas, Theodorus declared that Van Gogh couldn't hope to advance his vocation without attending theological college.

In May 1877, Van Gogh went to lodge in Amsterdam with another uncle (Jan), to study for the university entrance exams and the theological degree necessary for a good position in the Church. Latin, Greek and mathematics were on the curriculum and Van Gogh pursued them for over a year ('the worst time of my life') before dropping out in July 1878.

Van Gogh next tried Laeken, near Brussels, and a short course at the School of Evangelism. Theodorus had recommended this, hoping it would suit him better but again Van Gogh failed to qualify. His next move was to Paturages near Mons, in the grim mining district of Belgium called the Borinage. Happily, Van Gogh was appointed a lay preacher for six months at Wasmes. He threw himself into the work but, typically, went too far. He slept on straw, gave all his warm clothes away and ate leftovers. The mission sponsors were disgusted at his appearance and refused to renew his appointment. And so Van Gogh was left virtually destitute in nearby Cuesmes.

He began to sketch the working people around him. Sometimes he managed to exchange a drawing for a piece of bread. One generous miner gave him shelter in his crowded cottage and Van Gogh worked outdoors on large sheets of paper for lack of space inside.

He finally contacted Theo, who responded with financial help



(which he was to provide for the rest of Van Gogh's life), and in October 1880 Van Gogh moved to a small hotel in Brussels, on the Boulevard du Midi. He looked forward to attending exhibitions again, but above all he longed to meet other artists.

In April 1881, to economize, Van Gogh went back to Etten and his parents. Another visitor to Etten that year was Cornelia Vos-Stricker, nicknamed Kee. She was the daughter of their mother's brother, recently widowed with a young son. Van Gogh fell deeply in love and was devastated when she rejected his offer to replicate her happy marriage. His letters unanswered, he decided to confront Kee at her parents' home in Amsterdam. Uncle Stricker barred the way and Van Gogh held his hand over an oil lamp, threatening to keep it there until Kee appeared. His uncle simply replied by blowing the lamp out and Van Gogh left, humiliated.

Not surprisingly, relations between Van Gogh and his parents worsened. In December, after a violent row with his father, he left for The Hague. There, he contacted Anton Mauve, a cousin by marriage. The painter supplied Van Gogh with his first set of watercolours and showed him how to use them. With money borrowed from Mauve, Van Gogh was able to set up a small studio of his own, near the railway station, and to employ models.

And so Clasina Hoornik (Sien) entered his life. She was a prostitute and pregnant with her second child. Against all advice, she came to live with Van Gogh, and to him this was idyllic; he had a little family to care for, as well as access to a live model. But Sien also brought health and money problems and Van Gogh's friends simply did not want to know.

Nevertheless, during nineteen months spent with her and the children, Van Gogh gained his first drawing commissions, produced a number of paintings and tried stone lithography. But life with Sien was always disordered and in the end Van Gogh left. After six lonely



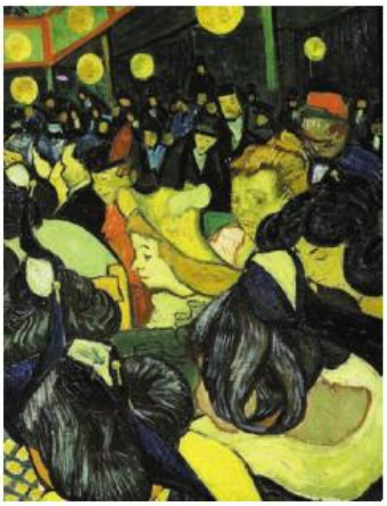
weeks in Drenthe, he joined his parents at their new parsonage in December 1883.

Nuenen, near Eindhoven, was populated with craft weavers and spinners, and for the next two years Van Gogh drew and painted in the genre of Millet and Breton, recording peasant life before the arrival of industrialization. He even gave a few art lessons to three pupils in Eindhoven, where he also had the opportunity to go on with his lithography. There was some tension when Van Gogh accused Theo of not trying hard enough to sell the paintings that he had begun supplying. Gently, Theo pointed out that they were too sombre for current Parisian taste.

Theodorus Senior died from a stroke in March 1885, heralding yet more changes. It happened just as Van Gogh was completing his first large-scale composition, *The Potato Eaters* (p.24), also rated his first masterpiece. Critics complained of rough brushwork and distorted figures but Theo was wiser: 'Wait and see if he has genius. I think he has...If he succeeds in his work, he will be a great man...Those who care whether there is something in the artist more than mere superficial brilliance will respect him...that will be sufficient revenge for the animosity of so many others.'

In January 1886, Van Gogh travelled to Antwerp and enrolled in a fine art course at the Academy. True to nature, he did not last long, but Antwerp did open his mind to grand architecture, Rubens and Manet, and gave him a taste for the Japanese prints that were all the rage in Paris when he joined Theo there in March.

Theo was managing the Paris branch of Goupil's successors, Boussod, Valadon and Company. His brother's contacts in the Paris art world opened fresh doors for Van Gogh. He met the Pissarros, Monet, Degas, Renoir and Sisley and regularly called in to Père Tanguy's shop in Rue Clauzel – the unofficial headquarters of the avant-garde – where he met Emile Bernard, who was to prove a



lasting friend. In May 1886, Van Gogh visited the eighth Impressionist exhibition where he saw works by Gauguin, Seurat and Signac for the first time.

That summer, the brothers moved to a bigger apartment, where Van Gogh could have his own studio. Everyone noticed the difference in him; his health had improved enormously, and his palette became lighter as he experimented with bright colours, painting the fresh flowers he had delivered to the studio every day. He wrote to Wil: 'What is required in art nowadays is something very much alive, very strong in colour, very much intensified.'

Harmony between Theo and Van Gogh wore thin as time went on. Theo was not well (he suffered from syphilis) and living with the unpredictable Van Gogh was exhausting. Throughout 1887, Van Gogh's style continued to develop. He took to working outdoors along the Seine with Bernard and Signac for company; and produced many still lifes as well as portraits. However, his psychological health was deteriorating, not helped by the fact that he ate hardly anything and drank far too many absinthes and brandies.

In the dark, city winter of 1887, Van Gogh became romantically entangled with the female owner of the local Café du Tambourin, where his works were shown alongside post-Impressionists such as Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec and Bernard. Under pressure to make sales to a bourgeois clientele, and unable to cope with his own mood swings, he dreamed of escaping to form an artists' colony somewhere warm. He decided to quit Paris at last and prepare this 'Studio of the South'. Full of hope, in February 1888 he boarded a train for Arles.

His love of nature revived in sunny Provence and the year yielded over one hundred paintings. He painted outdoors: landscapes, a series of blossom orchards, lush parks and gardens, and sun-drenched wheatfields at harvest time. He identified each season and subject

with specific colours: 'Working directly on the spot all the time, I tried to grasp what is essential.'

He befriended several Arles residents and some of them sat for their portraits. Van Gogh had reached a peak: 'I am not conscious of myself any more...the picture comes to me as in a dream...Life is almost enchanted after all.'

He was too busy to be lonely, but he had rented the famous 'Yellow House' and longed to share it with another artist. Summer passed, autumn arrived and then, out of the blue, Gauguin wrote from Brittany. He could not afford the move to Arles but Van Gogh asked Theo to sponsor him.

Theo agreed because Gauguin had shown signs of success on the art market and he hoped that anything he received from the artist in exchange for his support would turn a profit. Excited at Gauguin's coming, Van Gogh painted studies of sunflowers for the walls of his room. They represented the southern sun and when he saw them Gauguin called them 'completely Vincent'.

Gauguin arrived in October 1888 and for nine weeks he and Van Gogh worked together peaceably. Van Gogh painted symbolic portraits of the two of them as chairs, and Gauguin persuaded him to experiment with working from memory. Gauguin painted a portrait of Van Gogh, which Van Gogh declared was 'me gone mad'. Unfortunately, this was prophetic.

Van Gogh usually succumbed to depression at the darkest time of the year. This winter however a worse illness appeared, a kind of epilepsy, with strange fits during which he might eat paint or even dirt. Just before Christmas Van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor and later cut off his own earlobe. He presented it to one of the prostitutes in a local brothel, asking her to 'keep this object carefully'. Van Gogh was taken to the local hospital. Theo visited him there but Gauguin disappeared to Paris.



When discharged in January 1889, Van Gogh was still unwell. He blamed excessive drink and smoking, without giving up either. Petitioned by the anxious people of Arles, he was re-admitted to hospital but eventually left the area in May and headed for St-Rémy, entering the asylum there as a voluntary patient. The diagnosis was 'acute mania with hallucinations of sight and hearing'.

Van Gogh remained in St-Rémy for a year. He had his own room and adapted the one next door as a studio. Apart from some truly debilitating attacks, resulting in the confiscation of his paints to prevent him from poisoning himself, he managed to complete over 140 pictures: 'I feel happier here with my work than I could be outside. By staying here a good long time...the result will be more order in my life.'

At first, he recorded the view from his window. Later he was allowed out to paint the wheatfields, olive groves and cypress trees of the surrounding countryside.

Through Theo, *Irises* and *Starry Night* (p.70) were well received at the autumn Salon in Paris; with ten more pictures selected in March 1890, when Monet proclaimed Van Gogh's work the finest in the whole exhibition. Some paintings had also gone to 'Les Vingt' show in Brussels, and he made a sale for 400 francs, following a very favourable review by the critic Albert Aurier.

With his work gaining recognition at last, there was a feeling that Van Gogh had been locked away from normal life for long enough. Theo contacted a homeopathic physician named Dr Gachet and arrangements were made for Van Gogh to come north again, to stay under Gachet's supervision at Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris.



At the beginning of May 1890, barely recovered from his latest psychotic attack, Van Gogh set off alone to spend four days in Paris with Theo and his new wife.

Those brief days in Paris, with endless visits from fellow artists, were

physically and mentally exhausting for Van Gogh. He retired thankfully to Auvers, where Dr Gachet had booked a room for him at the Auberge Ravoux.

Van Gogh soon set about painting pictures of the neighbourhood and his new acquaintances. Working intensively, he produced seventy-six paintings in the next two months. He experimented with a series that formed a panoramic celebration of country life: 'I'm all but certain that in those canvases I have formulated what I cannot express in words, namely how healthy and heartening I find the countryside.'

Early in July, Van Gogh made another trip to Paris. He wanted to see Theo and the family, and to meet up with Toulouse-Lautrec and Aurier, who had reviewed him so flatteringly the previous spring. It would seem that the brothers had a row about money and the cramped conditions under which Theo was storing Van Gogh's paintings in their Paris apartment, and Van Gogh stormed off.

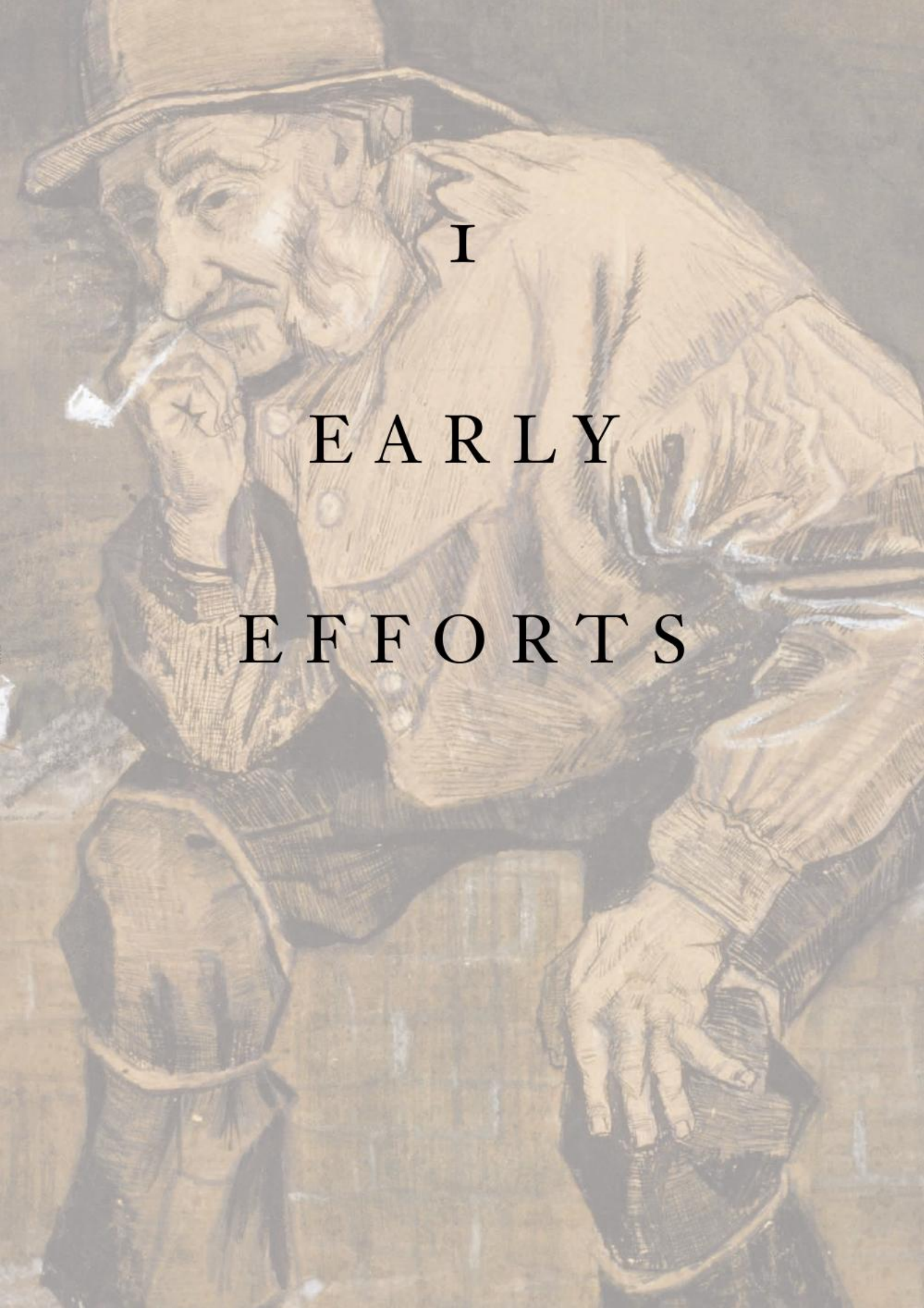
Back in Auvers, Van Gogh's relentless drive to paint – morning, noon and night – carried on until July. He wrote gloomily to Theo: 'I have risked my life for my work, and it has cost me half my reason…'

On Sunday evening, 27 July 1890, Van Gogh set out as usual for the wheatfields with his easel and paints. Apparently, he had announced that he wanted to shoot crows and someone had lent him a revolver. Instead, he shot himself in the chest, but not so badly that he couldn't manage to stagger back to the inn. There he collapsed, and both the local GP and Dr Gachet were summoned.

Gachet sent a message to Theo, who arrived the next afternoon and stayed at Van Gogh's bedside for the remaining few hours of his life.



Night fell, and Theo held Van Gogh in his arms as he spoke his last words: 'I wish I could pass away like this.' With a bullet lodged beneath his heart and after one final epileptic attack, Vincent van Gogh died at 1.30 a.m. on 29 July 1890.



I

EARLY EFFORTS

Interiors, exteriors, people and places

The earliest of Van Gogh's drawings, mostly from the 1870s, are promising in their composition and sense of place and atmosphere. Heavily influenced by the Dutch school of the day, they tend to be of limited colour range, with an emphasis on their tonality. However, Van Gogh seemed to be already seeing far more than he could yet express, and there can be no doubt that at this stage he would have benefited from a drawing master to help strengthen his technique.

Looking at the pen and pencil drawings Van Gogh made of his lodgings, and the churches he attended, it would appear that he has occasionally resorted to using a ruler. These are the pictures he might have made with a camera if he had one; they are a straightforward attempt at accurate representation. The same precision would prove helpful in mastering such techniques as proportion and perspective.

While working for Goupil in London from 1873 to 1875, Van Gogh greatly admired the wood engravings to be found in *The Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News*. In fact, he never lost the graphic edge gained through studying their line and shading techniques; and he could not have chosen better, because the skill of the Victorian engraver was at that moment at its height. Later, in the early 1880s, he collected entire bound copies of these journals, not only for the reproductions of artists that they featured but also because he admired the line illustrators they employed. He had it in mind to submit some of his own drawings eventually.

In 1880, Van Gogh was given manuals on anatomy and perspective by a benefactor. From that point on, he taught himself to draw with new understanding and his skill began to develop itself along with his choice of subjects; the working people he respected so much: 'My drawings are not yet what I want them to be…making progress is like miners' work.'

Five years later in 1885, Van Gogh's first painted masterpiece featured a peasant family in *The Potato Eaters* (p.24). His early efforts at painting can be seen to be much more indicative of the artist's future than his early drawings.



The Loyers' House, Hackford, London 1875

When Van Gogh was in England he went to the Royal Academy Summer Show and noted the beauty of the paintings by Tissot, the painter of society scenes. He admired many of the current artists and in a letter to Theo gives a list of names of contemporary painters. He said, 'most people did not admire enough' and urged his brother, who was already in the art business, to 'admire' as much as possible.

While he was in England Van Gogh mentioned that his love of drawing had decreased; nevertheless he produced several drawings of buildings during his time there. One of the houses that he lodged in, the Loyers' house, he drew in painstaking detail using a technique often seen in engravings. It looks as if it had been measured and ruled up and shows a sure grasp of proportion and aesthetic values.

Van Gogh had an artist's eyes for everything and even wrote a graphic description of the scene from his train into London. He later recalled the variety of local weather. He was a cultured and well-read man, conversant with English writers. He quoted from George Eliot concerning the evangelization of workers in London, and commented on the longing for religion among people in large cities. Van Gogh was much taken by painters who had a story or moral to tell, and the work of the French painter, Millet, was much loved by him for this reason.



Orchard near Etten, 1881

Here is a brilliant drawing by Van Gogh done while he was at Etten. It shows his efforts to improve his artistic abilities in drawing with his use of texture, tone and perspective. He has used the tones of charcoal and brown ink to add to the overall warm tone of the trees and then has contrasted this with a pale, whitish sky. His handling of the textural qualities drawn in line is masterly and demonstrates how his natural talent was beginning to show itself increasingly as he becme more committed to the life of an artist. He was very keen to show that the underlying discipline of painting was drawing and he didn't neglect his studies in this area. Indeed, most of his very early work is simply drawing although he did begin to paint intermittently, experimenting with both watercolour and oil paint. However his colour values remained subdued and not very different in effect from his drawings.





Men and Women Miners Going to Work, The Borinage 1880

This watercolour drawing was made by Van Gogh while he was in, or soon after he left, the Brussels mining district of the Borinage. It serves as an example of his ability even before he began to draw and paint seriously. The handling of the figures is quite refined but without the power he later developed. The background is well observed, although the strange bedraggled trees which conveniently fit the spaces between the figures do appear somewhat contrived and are typical of an untaught amateur. Nevertheless, despite the shortcomings of this drawing when compared with the work he was to produce in the next ten years, the promise is evident. For example, the handling of the background buildings is relatively sophisticated and shows an understanding of perspective and mass.



The Potato Eaters, Nuenen 1885

By now Van Gogh had ended his happy domestic arrangement with his model and lover, Sien, as her mother had persuaded her to revert to her previous employment as a prostitute. Van Gogh's parents took him back into their home at Nuenen and helped support him while he worked as an artist.

At about this stage Van Gogh spent much of his time visiting peasant families in their homes to make drawings and paintings as studies for his first real masterpiece, a scene of a meal in a peasant community, *The Potato Eaters*.

This was Van Gogh's first large composition and is the culmination of his early efforts to become an artist. It is a master-work that tells us that the artist hopes to achieve a place in the world of serious, professional painters. Van Gogh's aim was to portray a realistic image of the peasant people, to paint the real thing instead of an idealized picture, even comparing the peasants' complexions with the colour of the potatoes they eat. This work demonstrates how much Van Gogh had learned from spending time with the peasants and producing so many detailed studies of themselves, their homes and their lives.

Van Gogh's own view of the painting: 'I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labour, and how they have honestly earned their food. I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or admire it at once.'





Hands, Nuenen 1885

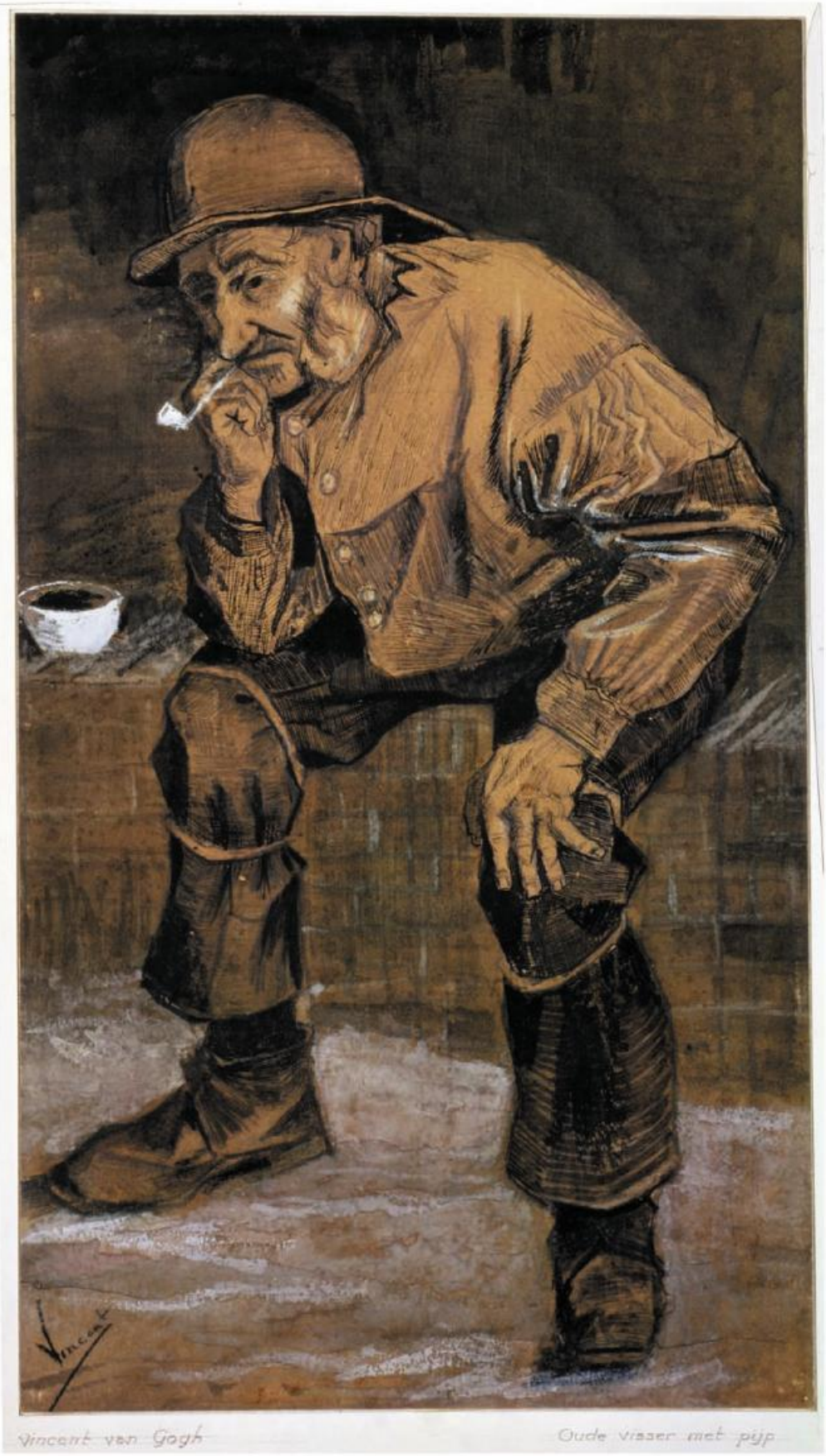
While working towards his large painting *The Potato Eaters*, Van Gogh spent a lot of time drawing details of peasant life. He produced at least forty studies of hands, heads and complete figures in different positions in order to work out his final composition. This work is one such study although it was not actually eventually used in *The Potato Eaters* (p.24). The hand grasping the wooden handle of an implement is very strong and uncompromising, showing clearly the workmanlike quality of the fingers and knuckles. These are not a model's hands but hands of a worker of the soil, full of strength and vigour.

Peasant Woman's Head, Nuenen 1885

The head of this peasant woman is handled in a similar manner to other peasant portraits he painted around this time. Van Gogh's desire to show sincerely and truthfully the qualities of a peasant is apparent in this portrayal. The rather uneven features, the lumpy texture of the paint and the thick brushstrokes help to emphasize the earthy quality of the workers of the land, their flesh resembling the earth itself.

Van Gogh did not regard his studies of heads as portraits of individuals but as depictions of facial types. He sought out, 'rough, flat faces with low forehead and thick lips, not that angular [type] but full and Millet-like'.

The head is enhanced by the dark shadows and background, which help to dramatize the features. Nevertheless, although somewhat careworn, this face gives the impression of a woman full of life.


Vincent van Gogh
Oude visser met pijp

Old Man with Pipe, Nuenen 1883

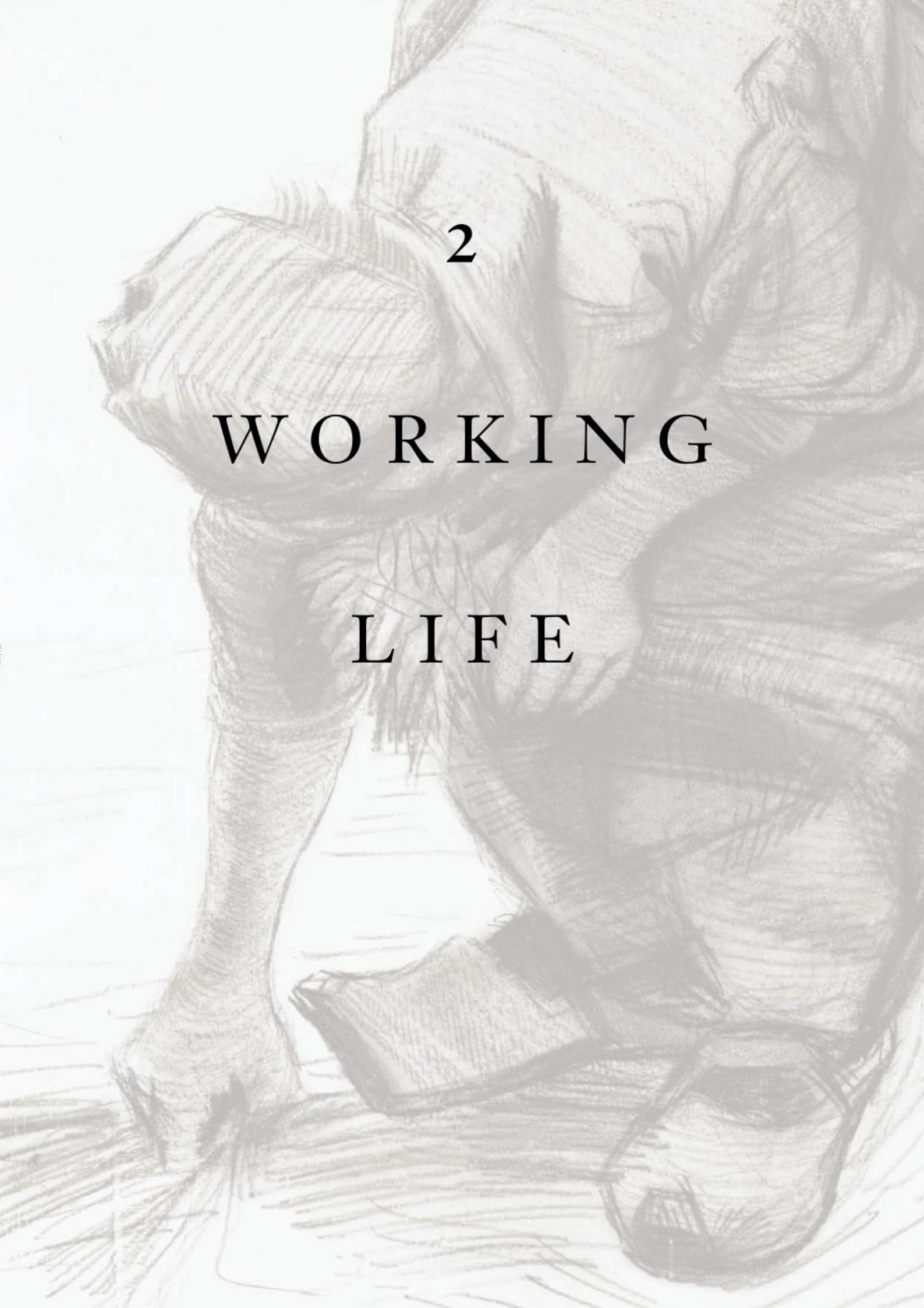
This typical study, in pen and ink and charcoal, is of an old working man in his smock and trousers, tied with string. He is obviously taking a break from his work, possibly in front of a fire.

The handling of the pen, ink and charcoal has produced a rich textural drawing; the gnarled hands, whiskery face, hat and pipe give us a glimpse of the people with whom Van Gogh was living at the time. There is a slight element of caricature about the drawing, just enough to suggest character but without distortion. The care that Van Gogh has taken over the shirt, such as the creases in the sleeves, the brimmed hat, and the details in the hands and face, suggest that the old man was sitting long enough to enable Van Gogh to include considerable detail.



Figure on a Road, Nuenen 1884

This rather classic scene, typically Dutch with its limited colour range and tonality, is in pen and brown ink on buff paper. The scene, of an avenue of trees with the sun casting long shadows across the road and a lone figure, was produced, among others, by Van Gogh while he was in Nuenen. It may be a drawing worked up from an outside sketch, or even partly copied from an older piece of Dutch landscape painting, and the technical proficiency of the drawing is remarkably good. The handling of the dark, overhead branches of the trees creates a satisfying texture which helps their highlighted trunks and the patchy light stretching across the road looks much brighter by comparison. The small female figure helps to give scale to the whole composition and Van Gogh seems to have made rapid, straightforward progress through the stages of learning about drawing and painting.



2

WORKING LIFE

Peasants, miners, farmhands and cottage industries

All his adult life Van Gogh identified with working men and women; the industrial workers, servants and farm labourers – even prostitutes – whose rights were least considered by the middle and upper classes but whose labour was demanded unquestioningly.

In 1876 Van Gogh became very keen to obtain 'a job between clergyman and missionary among working people in the suburbs of London', and to that end he took a job as an assistant to a Methodist preacher in Isleworth, a Thames-side village west of London. His religious fervour had come upon him the year before and he assured his brother Theo that this was the career he wanted to pursue. However, his career in England was short-lived: Van Gogh had an uncanny knack of rubbing people up the wrong way, and was often too zealous for his own good. The hard truth also was probably that he was not a good enough preacher, and his rough and ready appearance – in sympathy with his 'flock' – often left a lot to be desired.

On returning home, Van Gogh was unable to measure up to his father's hopes when he failed to obtain a theology degree in Amsterdam, nor did he impress the School for Evangelists in Laeken. Nevertheless, his vehemence and commitment carried him as far as a probationary term with a deprived mining community in the Borinage district of Belgium. There at last, he taught children, visited the poor and took Bible classes. But it was to no avail. His identification with the miners had gone too far in the opinion of the governors. He was living alongside them, sharing in abject poverty and therefore not setting the correct, aspirational example.

Without the shock of this rejection in 1879, Van Gogh might not have decided to abandon evangelism once and for all and become an artist instead. However, he saw that he could portray the harshness and earthiness of working life through art, rather than a sentimentalized version more acceptable to bourgeois tastes. With the encouragement of his brother, Theo, he embarked on a career as an artist with his customary zeal and commitment.



Weaver Seen from Side, Nuenen 1884

In this painting, Van Gogh produces a very convincing interior painting reminiscent of Rembrandt in its tone and colour. With the clearly drawn framework of the loom set in the space of the small cottage of the weaver, the low-key colour values are realistic in their feeling of an unembellished working environment.

The quality of light coming through the window highlights the surfaces of the woven cloth and the upper edges of the structure of the loom. The light also catches the profile of the weaver, with his gaunt, angular face and his knobbly hands. Through the window is a church, and a woman bending to weed or plant; the gentle green of the land suggesting a warmer time of year.

What is clear is how Van Gogh showed the dominating character of the loom in the room's space, as it seemingly cages in the weaver. The look or character of the weaver has no real individuality, but one registers him as an earthy type. The composition is both powerful and sympathetic, and the feeling of the enclosed space is very palpable.



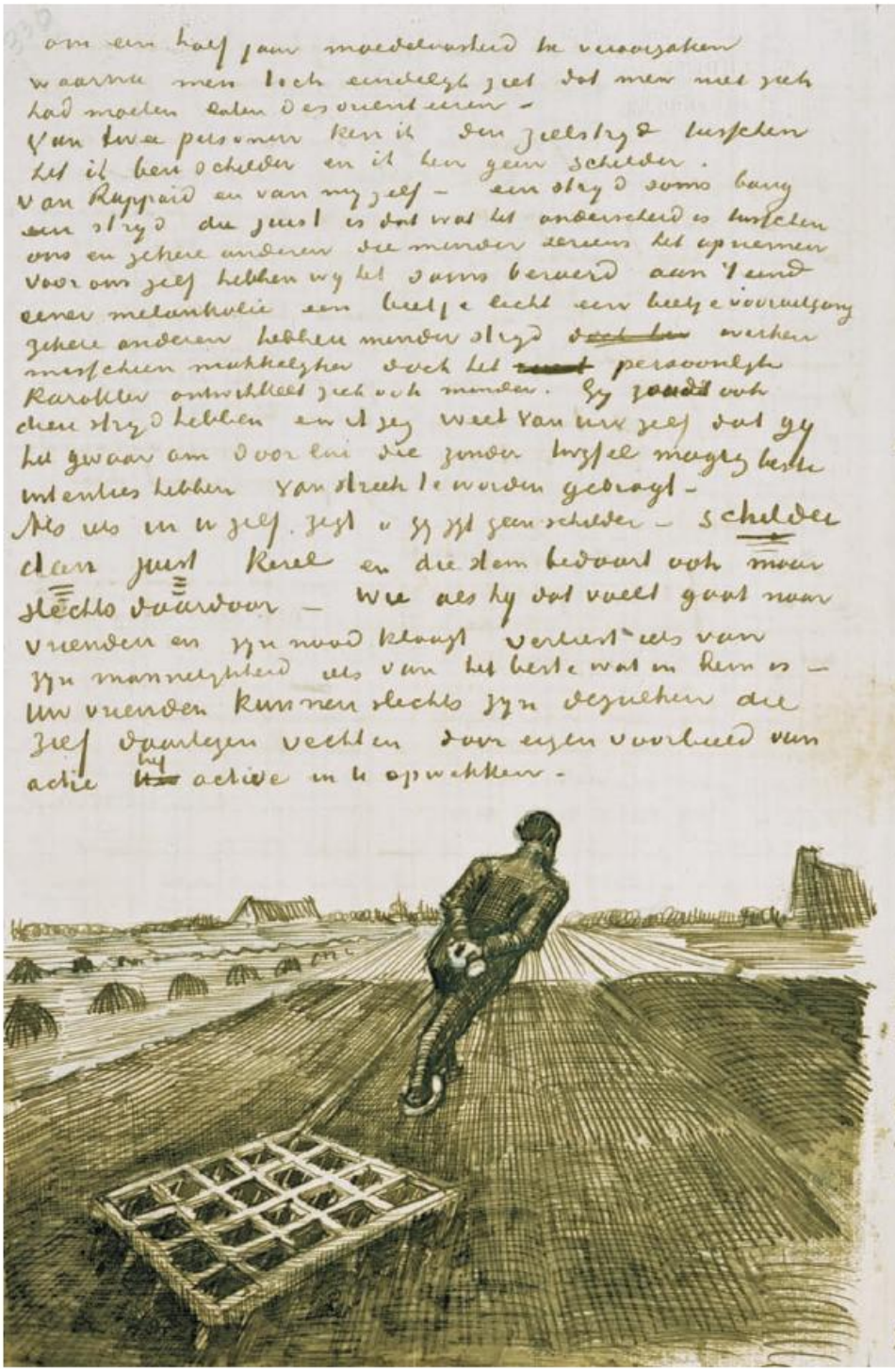
Seamstress from Scheveningen, Etten 1881

This work of a countrywoman sewing, painted in watercolour and heightened by white, was painted by Van Gogh partly while she was posing and partly from drawings. It shows how his understanding of the values of texture and tone produced a scene that is full of depth and interest while remaining simple. The marks are fine and produce a rich but muted colour scheme rather in the tradition of Rembrandt and his followers. Van Gogh's ability to balance tonal values so effectively is evident in this portrayal of atmosphere and image, and is evidence of his progress as an artist.

At this time Van Gogh proposed to his widowed cousin Kee Vos, who was staying in Etten, but was rejected. At first she remained on friendly terms with him but returned to Amsterdam when he continued to declare his love for her. He tried to follow but was prevented from seeing her again by her family and friends. He said: 'That higher feeling which I cannot do without is love for Kee. Mother and Father argue in this way: she says No, so you must resign yourself. I do not see the necessity of this at all, on the contrary…In order to work and to become an artist, one needs love.'

Writing about her later Van Gogh said, 'She lived in a modest, simple little room; the plain paper on the wall gave it a quiet grey tone, yet warm like a picture by Chardin.' This painting has all the quality of a Chardin figure and one wonders whether it was an attempt to recall Kee Vos's image in the guise of a seamstress.





om een half jaar moedeloosheid te veroorzaken
waarvan men toch eindelijk ziet dat men niet zoo
had moeten doen desorienteeren –
Van twee personen kan ik den zielstrijd tusschen
het ik ben schelder en ik ben geen schelder.
van Rappard en van mijzelf – een strijd soms bang
een strijd die juist is dat wat het onderscheid is tusschen
ons en zekere anderen die minder serieus het opnemen
voor ons zelf hebben wij het samen bereerd aan 't eind
eener melancholie een beetje echt een beetje vooruitgang
zekere anderen hebben minder strijd ~~dood~~ werken
menschen makkelijker ook het ~~meest~~ persoonlijk
Karakter ontwikkelt zich ook minder. Zij zouden ook
dien strijd hebben en ik zeg weet van uw zelf dat gij
het gewaar om door uw die zonder twijfel mogen beter
intenties hebben van streek te worden gebracht –
Als als en u zelf. zegt u zij zijt geen schelder – schelder
dan juist Kerel en die dan bedoelt ook waar
slechts daardoor – wie als hij dat vaak gaat naar
vrienden en zijn nood klaagt verliest als van
zijn mannelijkheid als van het beste wat in hem is –
uw vrienden kunnen slechts zijn degenen die
zelf daarlegen rechten door eigen voorbeeld van
actie ~~uw~~ hij actieve in te opwekken –

eggen is mag w
zijn eigen pa
hier. Gij ma
veranderen –
Gij hebt gedaan
zien – nu me
goed gij verder
Gij kunt besluit
Een woord van
gewonden –
~~nu~~ zie
zekere resolute
woord het is
aan hij uit wien
punkt redenatie
te bevaar hoort
rawengekken –
wat is dat stil
niet eens zeggen
al dat ravengekr
dat graf – zelf
zou men ge
leeren van de
een zachtje
van de dingen
Goed ding van
te zullen groeien
tegengaan Ik z
wat vind om ove
maar wil men
vallen – Dus
grond van Dien
Verdroog niet
zuet je zeggen –
op den Korenakker

Man Pulling Harrow, Drenthe 1883

This early drawing, included in a letter to his brother Theo, has an element of Van Gogh's later symbolic theme of a lone figure in a field. This particular figure does not appear to have any real symbolic meaning, but its dominating presence in the flat landscape is obviously something which struck Van Gogh as central to the composition. All the lines of hatching, which demonstrate his ability to create perspective, converge towards the vanishing point of the horizon, which is bounded by a hedge. On the way, these lines of perspective, of the furrows, hay stooks, etc., direct the eye towards the upper torso of the figure and place him in the centre of the picture. The heavy texture of the man's back and legs creates a feeling of strength and solidity and the hefty four-square harrow helps to emphasize the flatness of the foreground.

The angle of the man's body as he strains against the harrow's weight expresses how hard the work is – in fact the implement should probably have been pulled by a horse, if the peasant could afford one. This picture does not necessarily express the dignity of labour but rather it expresses Van Gogh's appreciation of the hard life that peasants had to contend with.





Women Miners, The Hague 1882

This watercolour heightened with white is a bleak picture of the laborious toil of these women who carry heavy bags of coal on their heads and shoulders and trudge through the snow of a cold Netherlands winter. The drab browns and blues of the dark figures clearly silhouetted against the snowy ground, the regular bare trees spaced out along the road and the black shapes of birds in the fields are highly evocative. The viewer can sense Van Gogh's sympathy for these women.

He groups the figures into a huddle in the centre right of the scene, and although the observation of the group proceeding along the road is well observed, the nearest figure looks a little posed and was probably drawn at another time and then used in this picture. However, the composition has some power and an understanding of how the dark group creates a sense of trudging effort. This attempt at a complete and thought-out composition shows the strength of Van Gogh's determination to be an artist.



Peasant Woman Digging, Nuenen 1885

The strong figure of the bent woman digging her spade into the earth is beautifully set against the sunlit hay in the field behind her. The dark, upper part of the background suggests trees and helps to throw into emphasis her sunlit haunches, back and head, giving a strong sense of dimension and substance. The ruggedness of her shape, highlighted by the use of angular lines, and the sharp contrast between the brightly lit areas and the strong, dark shadows of the folds in the cloth, shown up in the dark mass of her skirt, give great solidity to her shape. The way her bulging clogs catch the light and the depiction of the dark base of the skirt add a steadiness to the working figure. Van Gogh's observation of the movement of the woman is particularly good, although this image would probably have been worked on from sketches rather than painted directly from life. The lighter tone of the hands draws the eye to the focus of the work, the toil of digging.

This painting exemplifies Van Gogh's increasingly confident manner of handling paint, in this case with the use of heavy impasto: his exceptional talent is beginning to make itself felt.



Peasant Woman Stooping and Gleaning, Nuenen 1885

Van Gogh's studies of peasant women, bent over, working at a tiring activity, give the viewer an understanding of his models. This black-chalk drawing demonstrates the strong compositional tendencies that his drawings were now showing. It is drawn to a very high standard, especially the massing of shapes to create powerful expressions of the activities. His chalk strokes are now rapidly drawn and confident: he doesn't waste any marks and each stroke adds to building a convincing picture of volume and materiality. If we compare this drawing with *Peasant Woman Digging* (p.42), painted in 1885, it is evident that his constant drawing practice is paying off in both mediums.

The stooped figure produces an effect not only of the laborious nature of the job but also of the vigorous strength of the peasant and the integrity of her toil.

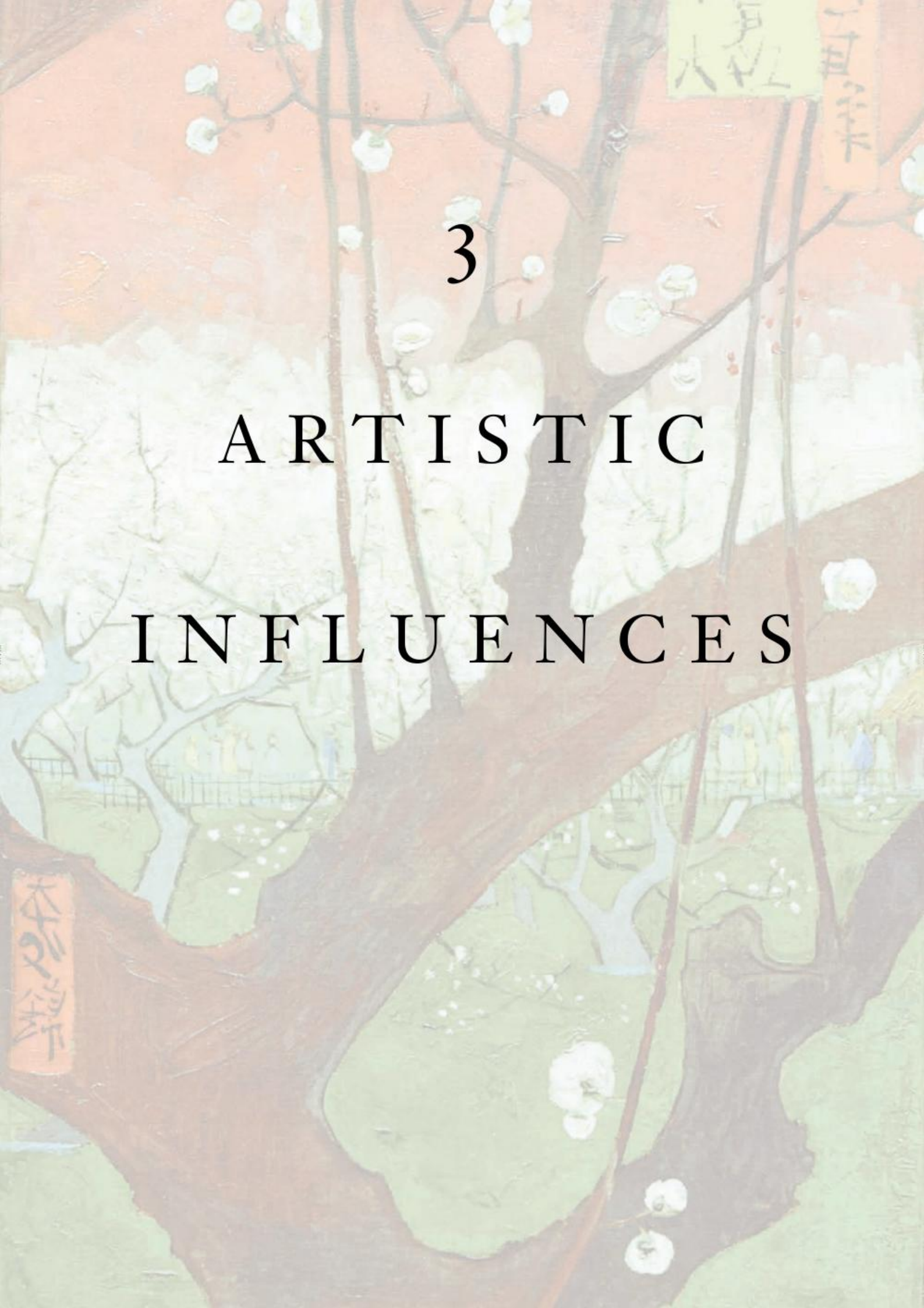




Peasant Woman Winding Bobbin, Nuenen 1884

Van Gogh kept on working on the theme of the local peasant population of Nuenen and continued to draw from life. This painting of a woman winding a bobbin is similar to other works he produced of peasant weavers in their cottages. These paintings are typified by their very low-key colour values and are almost tonal paintings, which may or may not be accurate as far as colour is concerned. It is certain that at this time the influence of painters such as Rembrandt tended to keep Van Gogh's range of colour limited to dark browns and greys with an occasional dash of white or yellow to liven up the tones.

It is noticeable how beautifully he showed the structure of the machinery, the interiors of the cottages and the concentration of the weavers working. Van Gogh showed the truth of the hardness of peasant life, and the sombre colours give some idea of his own belief in the unremitting grind of the human lot.



3

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Pictures after Bernard, Millet, Delacroix, Gauguin, Renoir, Seurat, Pissarro and Hiroshige

Van Gogh's correspondence with Theo gives plenty of hints as to the influences that guided his artistic career. Sometimes he reeled off whole lists of artists who had caught his eye, many of whom have since drifted out of fashion and been forgotten.

He very much admired the illustrations of *The Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News*, and every week he would have pored over their pages spread out in their offices' display windows.

Van Gogh grew up with the Dutch school, and the dark, early palette of his paintings can be attributed to this influenc: early on, he tended to be swayed by the subject of a picture rather than its artistic merits.

During his two years with Goupil in London, Van Gogh visited many galleries, including the National Gallery and the Royal Academy. He became familiar with masters such as Titian, Tintoretto and, in particular, the 'very beautiful' Constable, whose work stood out because it reminded him of Daubigny, one of the French Barbizon school that he handled at Goupil.

Reynolds, Romney, Gainsborough, 'Old' Crome, Bonington and Turner were acknowledged but not dwelt upon. Nor had Van Gogh very much time for those on the contemporary English scene, apart from John Everett Millais and Tissot, and a painter of doomed lovers and historical narratives called George Henry Boughton.

Examining Van Gogh's earliest efforts, we see he was clearly following a very traditional line evident across Europe and America at the time. As he matured, his attention was drawn to artists like Monticelli, the French artists Breton and Millet, Delacroix, Corot, and Daumier, with his biting social commentary.

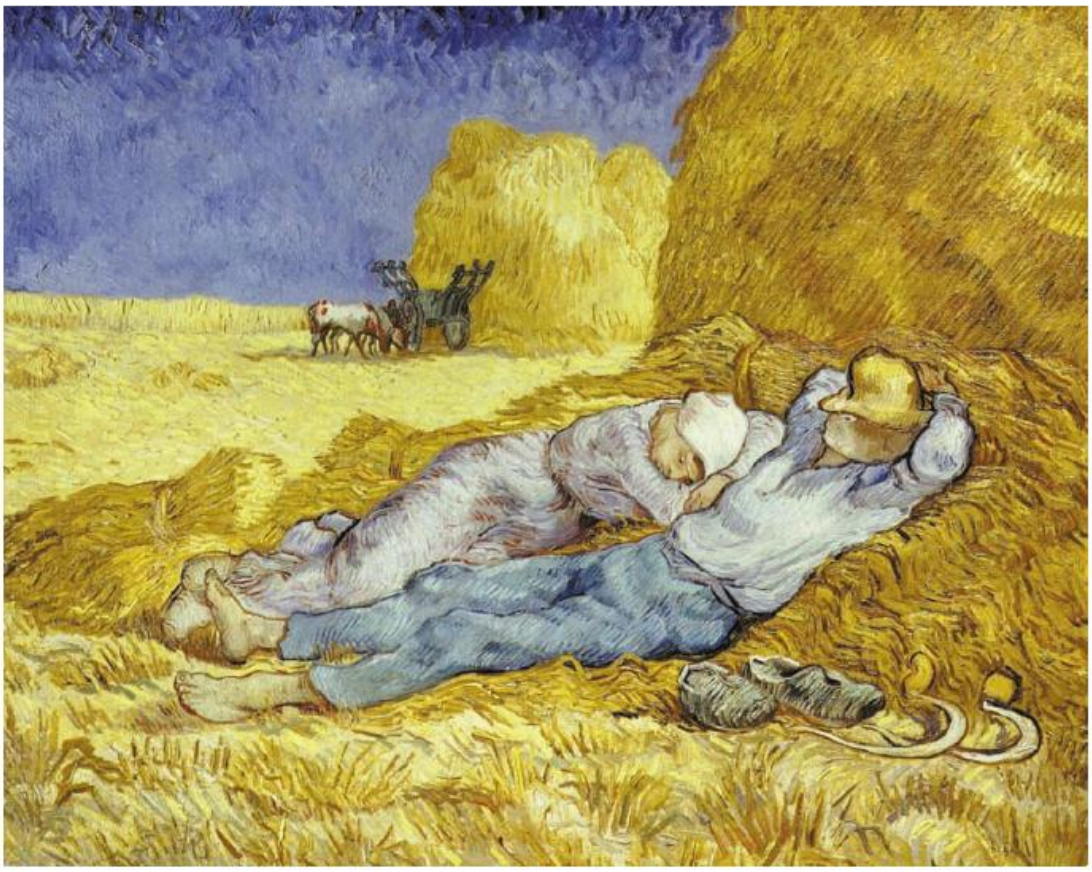
Once Van Gogh had moved to Paris with Theo in 1886, doors were opened and he mixed daily with the avant-garde, readily exchanging pictures with them. He seemed to keep quite a wide range of influences open to himself all his life but, even in his last years, would return to the diggers and sowers who always had a special place in his affections.

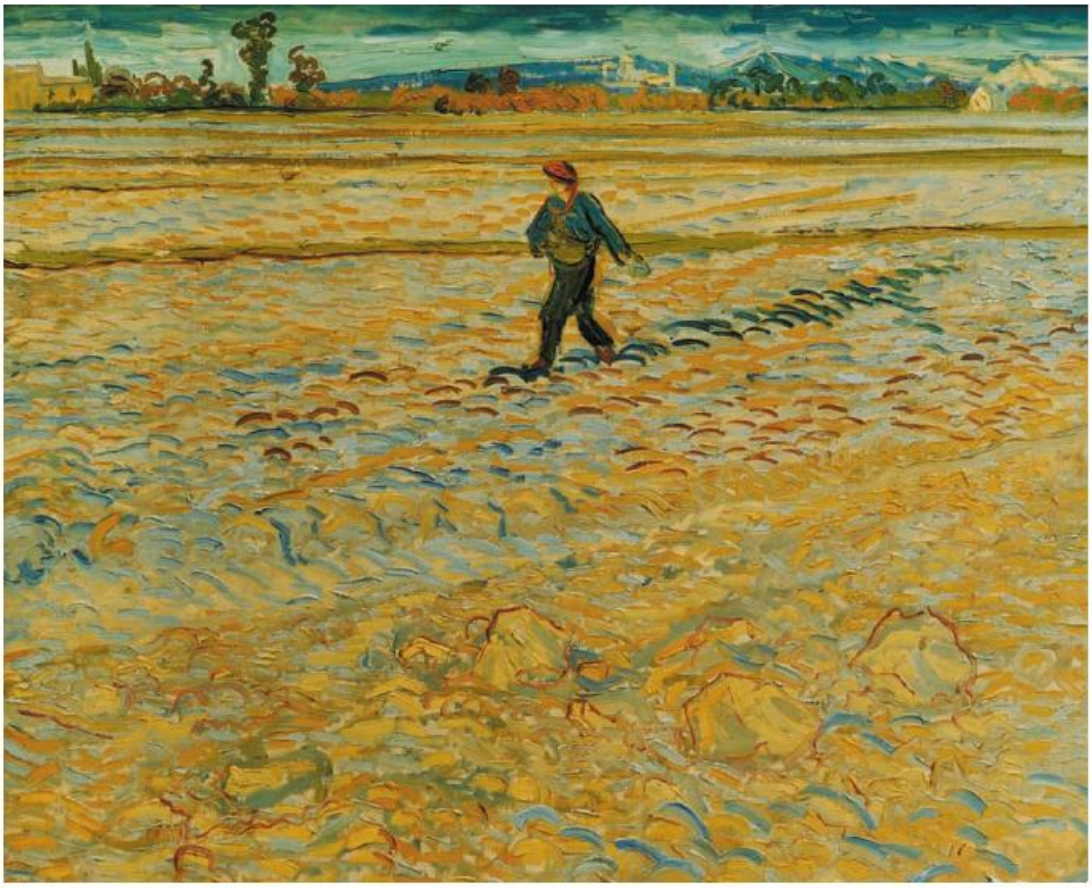


Breton Women and Children, Arles 1888 (after Bernard)

In this painting Van Gogh was observing and trying to learn from Bernard, a painter he had met in Paris and become friendly with. Bernard and Gauguin (another of Van Gogh's artist friends) had been to Brittany to paint the local figures in their traditional costumes and had tried to ignore the normal rules of perspective, producing works whose great pattern-making qualities were obtained by using strong colours and simplified shapes against flat backgrounds.

Van Gogh's effort to make an Emile Bernard painting resulted in something similar to a Bernard but, as in this example, his strong line in drawing kept breaking through. Bernard had sent Van Gogh photographs of his canvases, of which Van Gogh had said: 'The trouble with them is that they are a sort of dream or nightmare – that they are erudite enough – you can see that it is someone who is gone on the primitives – but frankly the English Pre-Raphaelites did it much better, and then again Puvis [de Chavannes] and Delacroix, much more healthily ...' But he also said of Bernard, 'he is a Parisian from top to toe, and to my mind a model of vivacity. He uses his brains quite in the manner of Daudet, but then more ingeniously ...' and to his brother Theo, ' ... a good canvas by him would be a fine thing to have in your collection'.





Noon: Rest, St-Rémy 1890 and The Sower, Etten 1881 (after Millet)

Throughout his life Van Gogh referred to paintings by the French painter Millet, who was a strong influence in his life. He made copies of works by Millet throughout his career, originally with similar colour values but later on with more intense colour, thus changing the effect of the picture.

The sower in Millet's painting was a rather noble and extraordinarily heroic figure, whereas Van Gogh saw the working peasant more realistically: strong but not noble, wresting his living from the earth by the sweat of his brow and with a lifetime of unremitting toil. This view of the peasant is demonstrated in the way Van Gogh always portrayed peasant figures: gnarled, almost stunted shapes, but with a vigour that looked as though they had grown from the earth itself. In Van Gogh's version of *The Sower* the forms of Millet are adhered to fairly faithfully, but somehow the drama and romance of the Millet figure has been subsumed in the rather awkward movement of Van Gogh's. The peasant's work now appears much harder and his appearance is grim, like an early version of *The Reaper*: the sower sows the seeds of man's futile existence while the reaper cuts it down again.

In his later copy of Millet's work, *Noon: Rest*, which he painted in St-Rémy in 1890, Van Gogh shows the resting haymakers in the shade of the haystack as drawn-out, knobbly, awkward human shapes with none of the grace of Millet's figures.

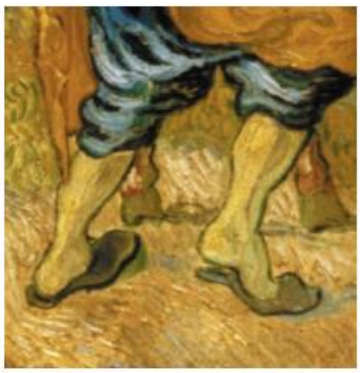
Van Gogh likened Millet's work to a gospel and his drawings to a good sermon: 'I consider Millet not Manet, to be that essentially modern painter who opened a new horizon to many...and what Michelangelo said in a splendid metaphor, I think Millet has said without metaphor, and Millet can perhaps best teach us to see, and get a faith.'

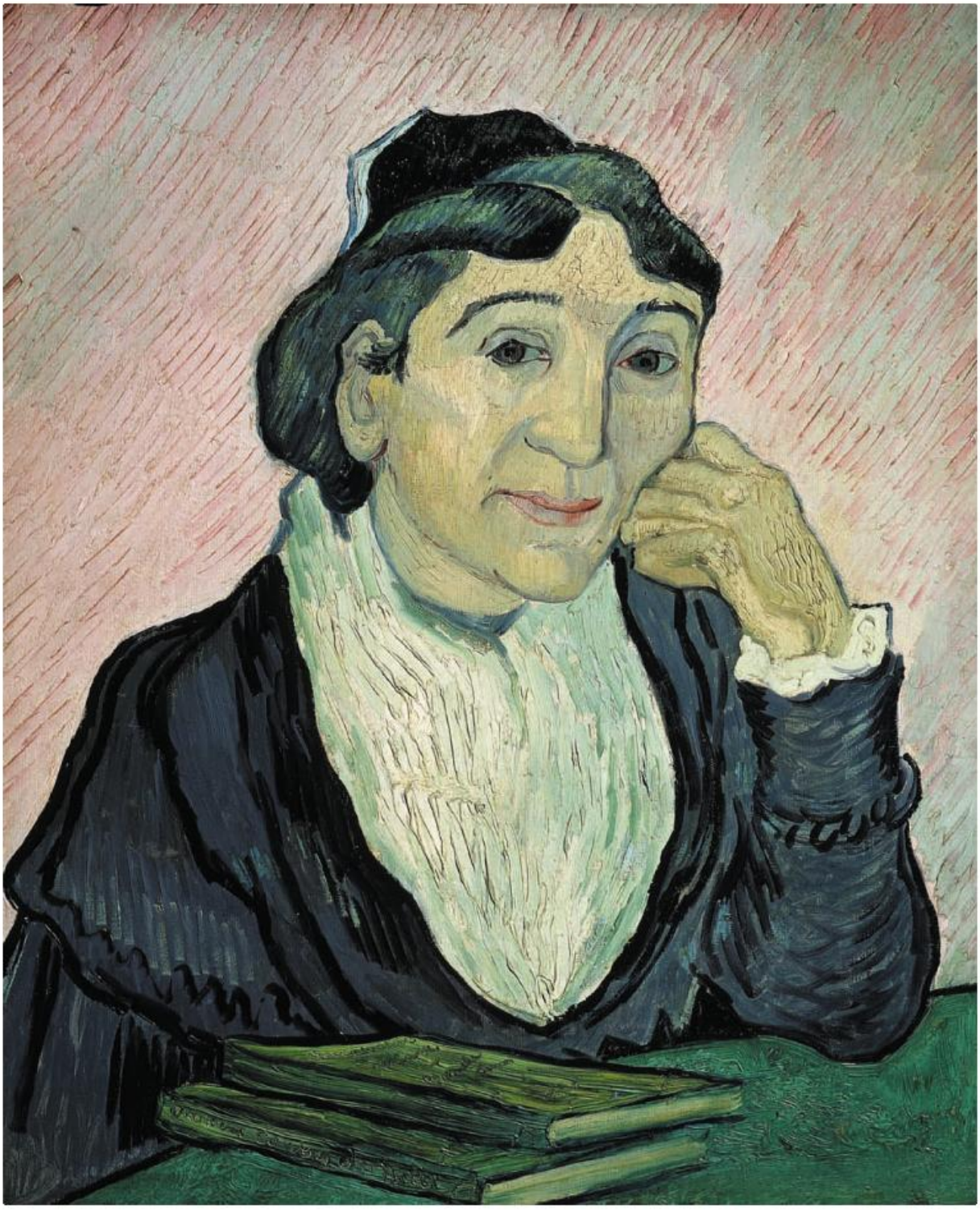


The Good Samaritan, St-Rémy 1890 (after Delacroix)

Van Gogh likened himself to Delacroix towards the end of his life when he knew he had little time left. Like Delacroix, Van Gogh worked as one possessed, pouring forth drawings and paintings at an impressive rate: 'I discovered painting when I no longer had any teeth or breath left...' His version of Delacroix's *The Good Samaritan* is a careful copy of composition. However, Van Gogh's new sense of colour and technique turns a romantic version of the parable into an explosive, rippling flow of colour and curling form. The figures no longer have Delacroix's grace and bravura but look desperate and awkward, while the very landscape flames with extraordinary greens, yellows, blues and violets. The action of the two main figures is energetic but they grapple like wrestlers, while the mule or donkey looks unbalanced and staggering.

Van Gogh painted this while in the hospital at St-Rémy, when it was difficult for him to paint outside. Working on this painting may well have helped his temporary improvement. He wrote: 'The figure of Christ, as I feel it, has been painted by Delacroix and Rembrandt ... and later Millet painted...the doctrine of Christ.'



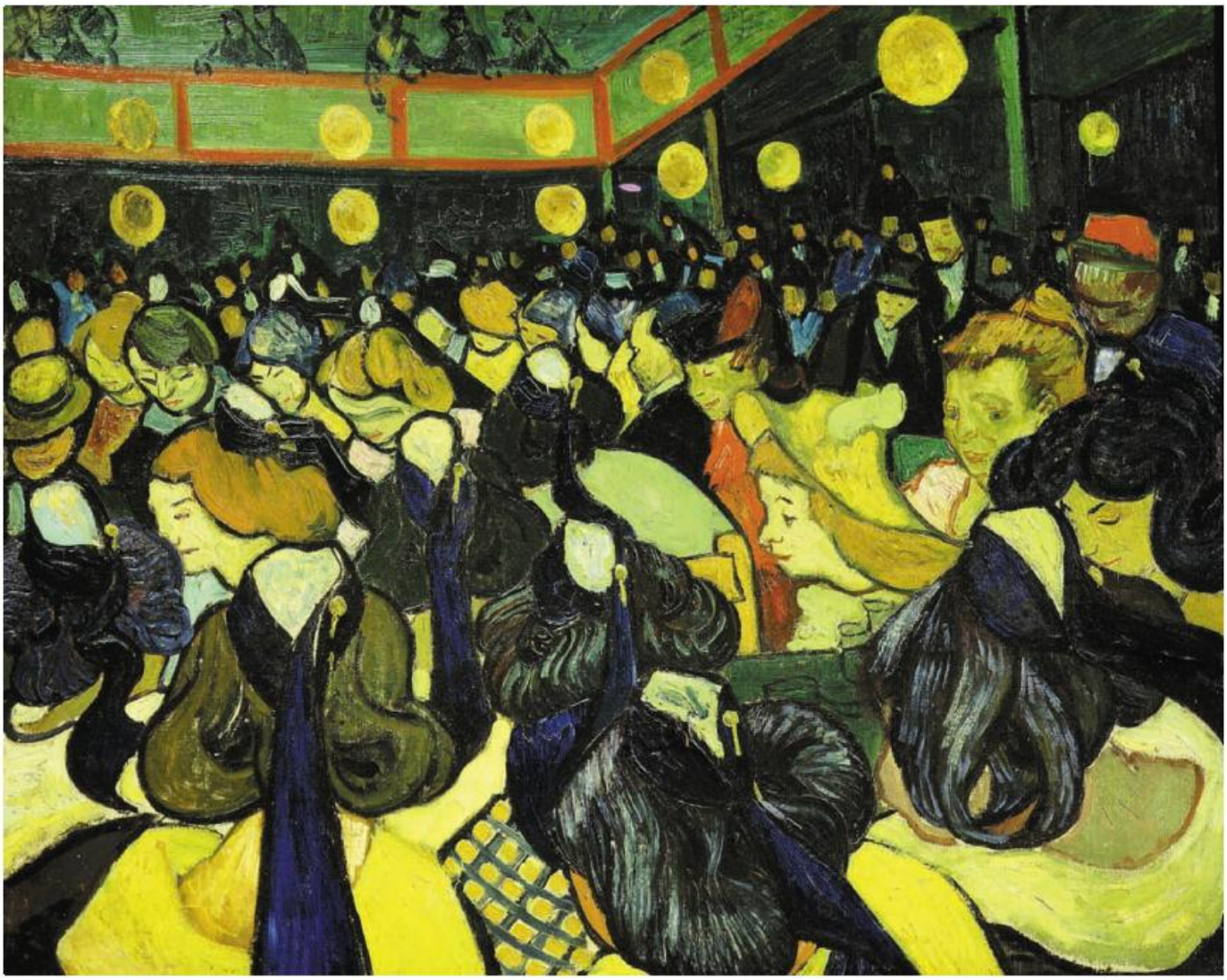


The Arlésienne (Madame Ginoux), St-Rémy, 1890 (after Gauguin)

This portrait of Madame Ginoux from the café in Arles was painted by Van Gogh directly from a drawing of Gauguin's that he admired. While at Arles Van Gogh said that he 'was powerless to paint the women of Arles as anything but poisonous', which was directed at Degas who had talked of 'saving myself up for the Arlésiennes'. It is likely that this remark referred to Van Gogh's wish that his house in Arles would house a community of artists who would come and paint the glories of Provence before moving on further south.

While at St-Rémy he painted at least five versions of Madame Ginoux from Gauguin's drawing. Madame Ginoux was ill and Van Gogh was concerned about her health; consequently he was allowed out of the hospital to go and give her one of the paintings. He wrote to her and her husband saying, 'I write you…my dear friends in order to try and distract our dear patient for a moment, so that she may once again show us her habitual smile and give pleasure to all who know her.' After his visit, Van Gogh failed to return to the hospital and was found by an attendant wandering helplessly about.

Van Gogh's admiration for Gauguin's work was boundless and he was certain that the art world needed artists such as Gauguin; with the strong hands and stomachs of workmen, with more natural tastes, more loving and more charitable. Van Gogh called him 'a virgin creature with savage instincts. With Gauguin blood and sex prevail over ambition…'. He wrote to Gauguin about this portrait saying, 'I tried to be religiously faithful to your drawing, while nevertheless taking the liberty of interpreting through the medium of colour the sober character and the style of drawing…it is a synthesis of the Arlésiennes, if you like; a summary of our months of work together… to be understood by you, and by a very few others, as we would wish it to be understood.'



The Dance Hall at Arles, 1888 (after Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir)

In this evocative painting of figures flooding across the dance hall in Arles, Van Gogh emulated themes used by Renoir and his friend Toulouse-Lautrec. The flat handling of the colour contrasts follows a similar direction to Toulouse-Lautrec's graphic paintings of the *Moulin Rouge* series, while the cheerful colour and crowds of bodies are reminiscent of Renoir's *Moulin de la Galette*.

When Van Gogh was in Antwerp he visited a sailors' ball at the docks, and wrote of the girls: 'There were several very handsome girls, the most beautiful of whom was plain-faced. I mean, a figure... in black silk, most likely some bar-maid or such, with an irregular, ugly face but lively and piquant...she danced perfectly in the old-fashioned style...Other girls wore ordinary jackets and skirts and red scarves...it does me good to see folks actually enjoying themselves.'

Paintings of people enjoying themselves in a natural way, in a crowd with others, were pioneered by the Impressionists, such as Manet, Renoir, Monet and Degas. They thought that in place of the traditional, historic works so highly regarded by the formal art world they should record the common activities of the modern population and present them on an almost heroic scale. The modern world was what these painters wanted to depict, and Van Gogh was no exception.





*T*he Bridge in the Rain and Flowering Plum Tree, Paris 1887 (after Hiroshige)

Van Gogh painted these images when he was working from Japanese colour prints. The prints had taken the art world of western Europe by storm. They certainly fascinated Van Gogh and influenced his style: he owned twelve of these sorts of images and had several on the walls of his studio. These two copies are typical of Van Gogh's attempts to reproduce their style and form but to intensify the colour, and in one case add a border (*Flowering Plum Tree*), thus making them his own works in the style of Hiroshige rather than straightforward copies. He was very struck by how little the Japanese master was concerned about depth and perspective. Van Gogh was by now interested in freeing his own work from perspective and just allowing colour to produce the necessary dimension.

Van Gogh was so intrigued by the Japanese prints that he organized an exhibition of them at the Café du Tambourin, which influenced many of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters.

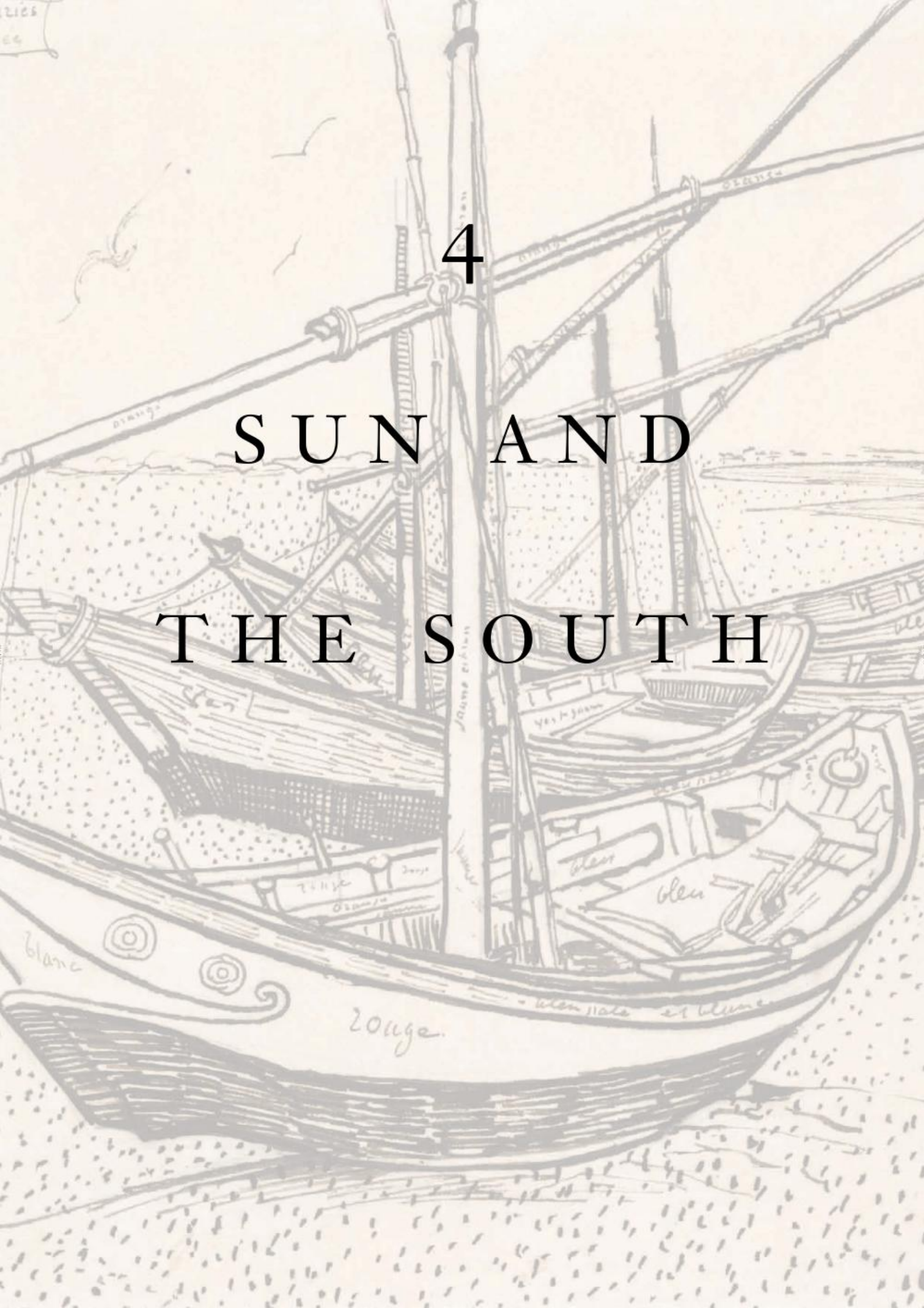




Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat, Paris 1887 (after Seurat, Pissarro)

This is one of the many self-portraits that Van Gogh painted while he was in Paris in 1887. He was beginning to experiment with new painting techniques, in this case with what might be called Neo-Impressionist or perhaps Semi-Pointillist. His short stabbing brush-marks are evidence of his attempt to encompass the ideas and techniques developed by the Impressionists in the 1870s and the early 1880s: laying strokes of one strong colour against strokes of other strong colours so that the viewer's eye, rather than the artist's brush, blends the pure colours to produce the tones of light the artist is attempting to portray. This self-portrait demonstrates how far Van Gogh's colour values had changed in a matter of two years.

Although he did not wish to portray himself as a saint, Van Gogh was pleased with this painting, in particular the halo effect of the background which gives some visual order to the multifarious brushstrokes of which this work is composed. He felt that the use of strong reds and oranges against strong blues and yellowish tones was successful in producing a lively colour dimension in the portrait. He used the same method in several other portraits.



4

SUN AND THE SOUTH

Landscapes, beachscapes and nightscapes

In February 1888, Van Gogh boarded a train from Paris for Arles, in the far south of France. His psychological health was deteriorating; he also ate too little and drank far too much.

As Theo had predicted, once Van Gogh had arrived in Paris in 1886 he had been unable to resist the Impressionists' colourful overturning of moribund Academy rules. His palette had undergone a radical revision, from the dark tones that had produced *The Potato Eaters* (p.24) to the glorious colours of fresh flowers. He had also benefited from being able to buy specific, custom-ground pigments from Julien Tanguy's marvellous shop in Montmartre

Once springtime arrived in Arles, Van Gogh began to paint with an abundance of energy, soon producing work of a wholly new quality. Gradually, the strong colours and brilliance of the sun and sky of Provence affected his palette, and deeper blues, more vivid yellows and greens competing with warm oranges and reds began to creep in. This intensity of colour is now recognised as Van Gogh's great contribution to modern painting, with life and colour bursting out of all these canvases during the time he spent in Provence: 'Colour expresses something by itself,' he declared.

It is an extraordinary fact that during the eighteen months between his move to Arles and his death in Auvers, Van Gogh achieved most of his major works. His landscapes of this period demonstrate how much his development as a painter owed to the countryside, but even his portraits and interiors seem to take from the climate and landscape the same powerful effect of strong colour under brilliant light.

Even during spells of mental disturbance, Van Gogh's treatment of colour didn't falter. He was surprisingly methodical and strove deliberately for the effects he was after: if an impression of darkness was given, it was to provide a contrast that would throw up a still brighter image. It is interesting that when he painted memories of the north, he kept to the stronger palette combinations that the southern sunlight seems to have released; thankfully, the darker elements of his psyche could not hold back this outpouring of light and power.





Drawbridge with Carriage, Arles 1888

When Van Gogh first arrived in Arles in February 1889 the whole of the Midi region was covered in snow. It had been one of the coldest winters for a long time and it lasted well into March. It was not until April that he was able to paint outside properly, and then we begin to see the effect on him of this new landscape and its bright, southern light.

This bridge across a canal reminded him somewhat of Holland and caught his fancy as a subject. The painting is one of a number of versions on this theme. The carriage is just passing over the bridge and a group of women wash clothes at the edge of the canal, in which there is a half-submerged boat. These elements produce an idyllic scene of activity without agitation and the combination of the blue sky, the carefully constructed drawbridge and the water reflecting the sky in its gentle ripples produces a very rich composition. An earlier painting of the same place shows a much greyer sky with the structure of the bridge looking much duller, whereas this version glows in the strong sunlight, picking out the yellow tones.

Once again Van Gogh proves how magnificently he could paint a work completed outside; clearly observed and with an immediacy of technique that brings out the solid dimensions of the scene. The structure of the wooden bridge is correctly observed so that one can sense the materiality of it, while the vegetation beside the canal softens the solid squareness of the stone-built section of the bridge against the emptiness of the sky beyond.

Detail In the detail of the painting it can be seen how Van Gogh has used parallel brushstrokes across the surface of the water where it is calm. Where it is broken by the washerwomen's actions, he swirls the water with tight semicircles of dark blue over the lighter blue body of the water. His figures are made up of roughly put-in blobs of colour which nonetheless work brilliantly in form and effect when viewed from a distance.



Starry Night, St-Rémy 1889

'One night I went for a walk by the sea along the empty shore. It was not gay, but neither was it sad...it was...beautiful. The deep-blue sky was flooded with clouds of a blue deeper than the fundamental blue of intense cobalt, and others of a clearer blue, like the blue whiteness of the Milky Way. In the blue depth the stars were sparkling, greenish, yellow, white, pink, more brilliant, more sparklingly gem-like than at home – even in Paris: opals you might call them, emeralds, lapis lazuli, rubies, sapphires. The sea was very deep ultramarine – the shore a sort of violet and faint russet, as I saw it.' So Van Gogh describes the night sky by the coast in the south of France in the summer of 1888.

When he came to paint his famous picture he obviously called on his memories of this type of night stroll. Van Gogh painted an extraordinarily powerful firework display of glowing stars, golden crescent moon and swirling blues, which seems to be partly clouds and partly the movement of the heavens themselves. Across the glowing sky the dark flames of the deep green cypress tree writhe upward in silhouette. The deep blue landscape, huddled under rounded hills, has a few windows glowing yellow with light in the darkened town, but the real illumination is in the sky which makes the land look dark in comparison.

Van Gogh said of the cypress, 'it is as beautiful of line and proportion as an Egyptian obelisk. And the green has a quality of such distinction. It is a splash of black in a sunny landscape.'

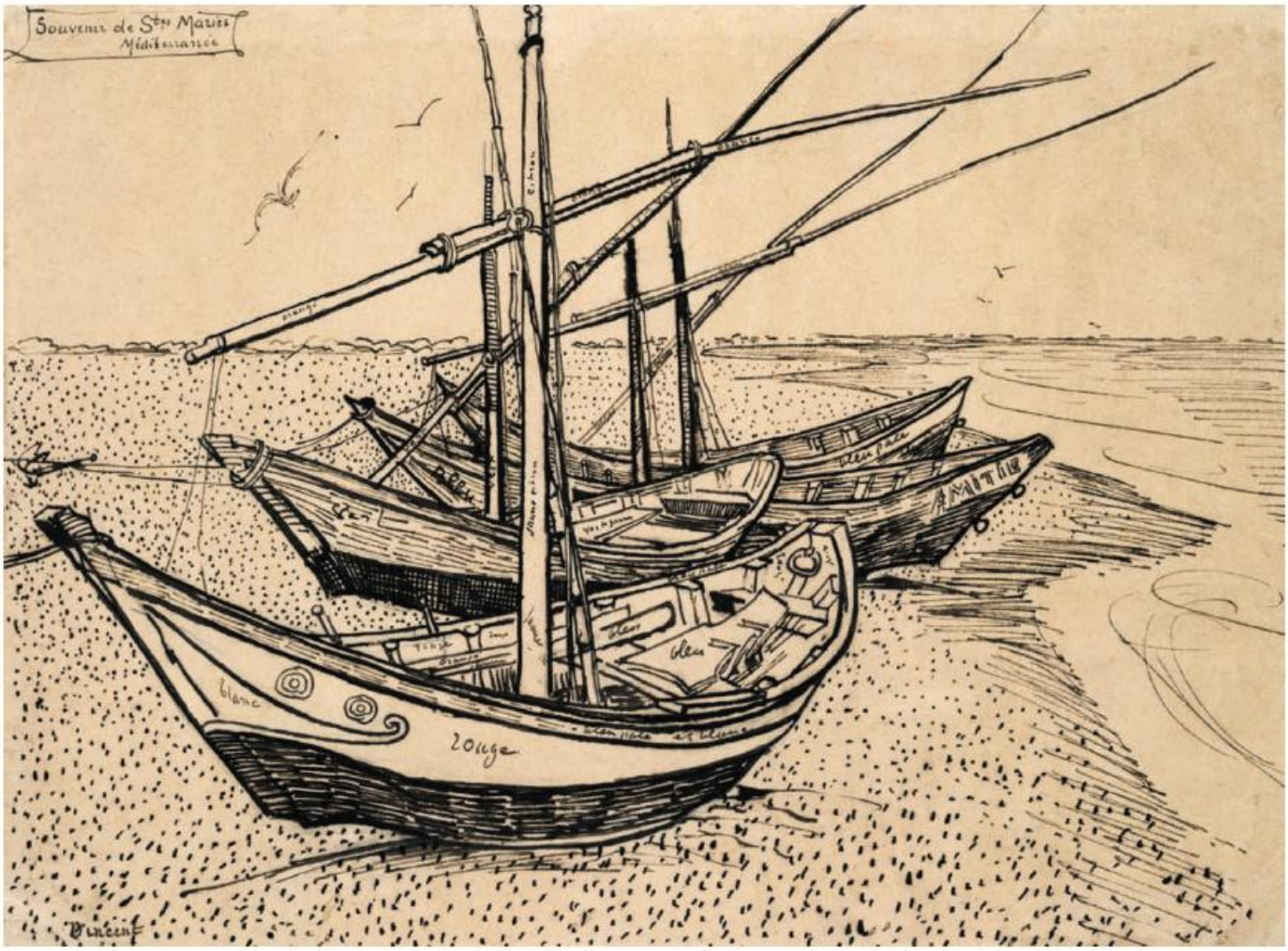


Haystack Near a Farm, Arles 1888

This is a brilliant sunlit scene of haystacks, with a cluster of farm buildings in the middle distance, and a line of blue hills on the horizon. Van Gogh managed to make the haystacks look like solid masses of hay, with the yellow stubble anchoring them to the land. The strong fresh greens of the trees and nearby grass provide a powerful contrast.

These are not like Monet's haystacks, which show the way light can dissolve the solidity of an object until you cannot be sure which is more material, the air or the object. These objects have the solid form of haystacks seen in bright sunlight, without any of the ambiguity to be found in the more watery atmosphere of northern Europe. The small, barely noticeable figure of the woman sitting against one of the haystacks in the foreground, talking perhaps to the standing figure as he works, gives a sense of scale to the close-up view of the stacks of drying hay.




Souvenir de Ste Maxime
Méditerranée
blanc
rouge

Fishing Boats on the Beach, Arles 1888

'I have only been here a few months, but tell me this, could I in Paris, have done the drawing of the boats in an hour? Even without the perspective frame, I do it now without measuring, just by letting my pen go...'.

Van Gogh went to the little fishing town of Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer for just a few days and completed nine drawings, two seascapes, a view of the town and drawings of boats (of which one is opposite). He saw the boats every morning, but as they put out to sea so early he did not have much time to paint them. However, he managed to take the drawings back to Arles with him and produce colourful paintings from them. The beautiful curved hulls of the vessels are caught wonderfully by Van Gogh and, with their scaffolding of masts thrusting up into sky, they make a very attractive composition.

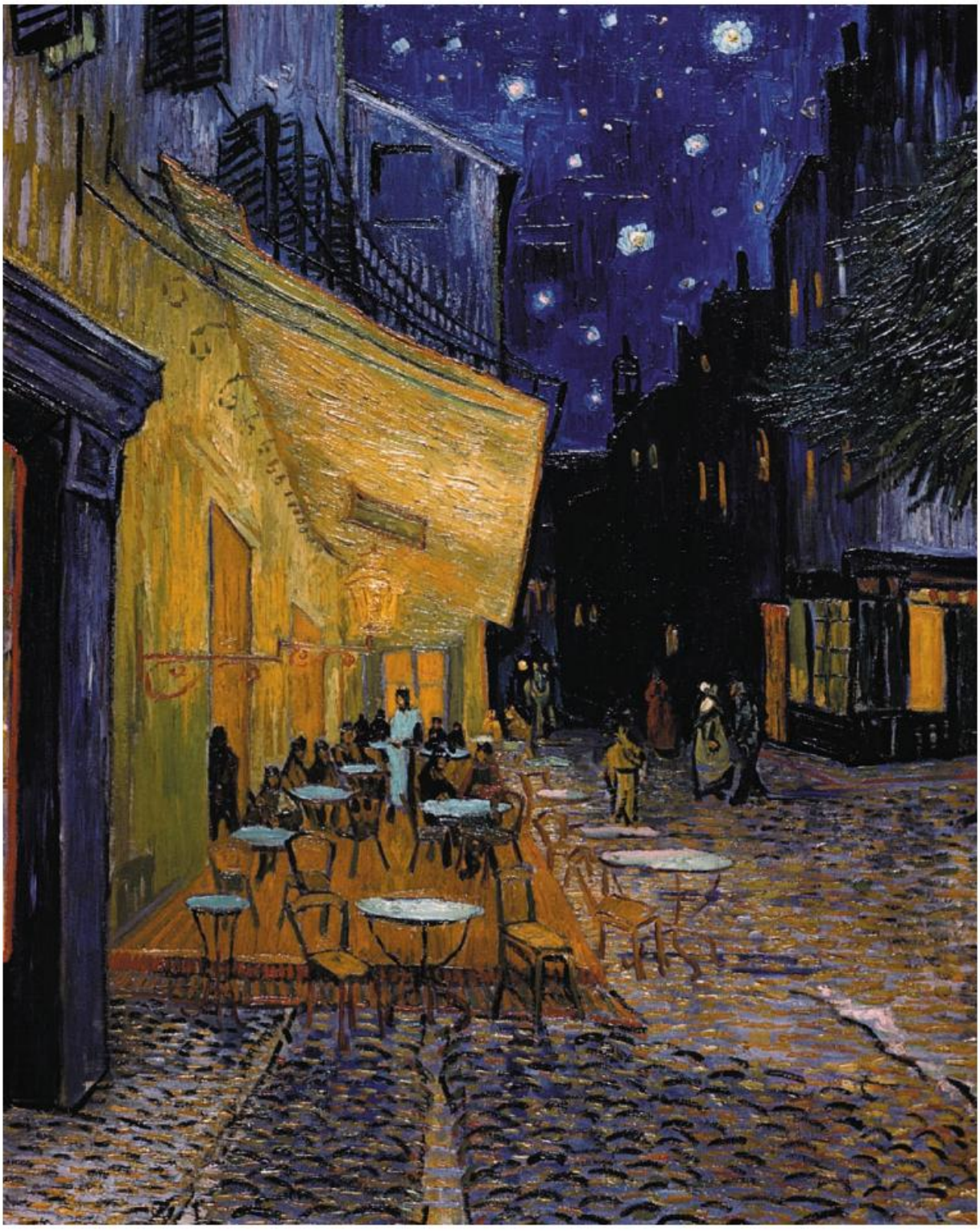
If you look closely you will see that he took meticulous care with labelling the boats with their correct colour designs.


Rhône

Landscape Near Montmajour with a Train, Arles 1888

This drawing demonstrates that Van Gogh had by now developed a masterly grasp of perspective. Drawing purely by eye, he no longer needed to use mechanical aids to help him. Drawing with ink in the open air is quite a feat in itself, but Van Gogh's vision was perceptive. He had the ability to make certain features jump out and was able to divide the landscape up in such a way that recession was clearly recorded, leaving no doubt in the viewer's mind that the flat surface gradually disappeared into the distance.

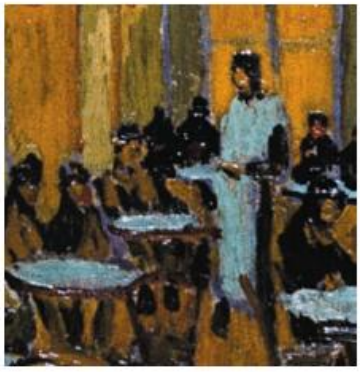
The actual marks he made with the pen give tremendous life to the scene, although most moving objects are so small that they could be easily missed. The carriage in the foreground and the two figures coming down the adjoining road give a sense of scale, which helps to make the marks used to indicate fields appear as crops, although they are just dots and dashes. The areas with darker, heavier marks give the right balance of spatial edges, which measure out the areas across the extended land. The way Van Gogh painted the horizon, so that it melts away into the sky without any harsh edge, helps to emphasize the distance.



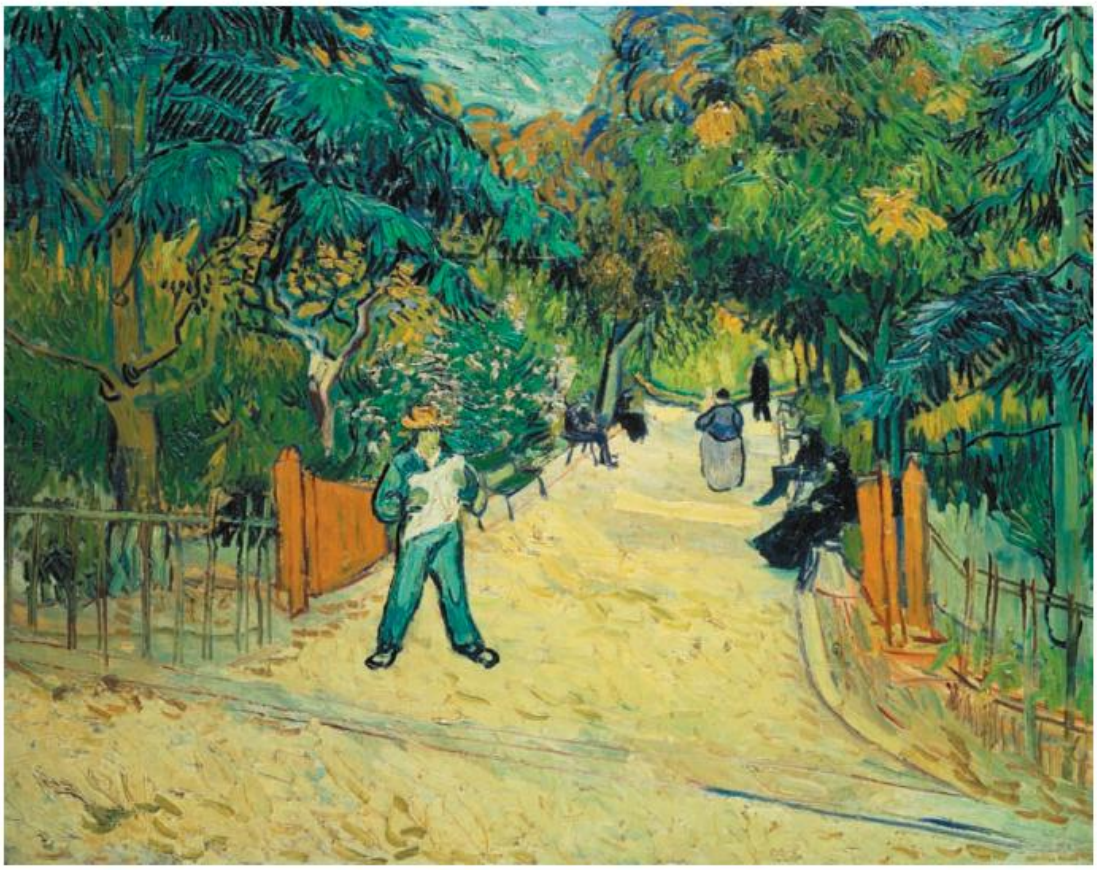
Café Terrace at Night at Arles, 1888

This painting is only one of Van Gogh's evocations of a southern night lit by a starry sky. The sky glows behind the darkened houses whilst in the foreground is the brilliantly-lit terrace of the local café with lamps, tables and chairs and people seated at the far end enjoying the warm night. The quality of the paint is rich and brushed on in thick short strokes to create the curved cobblestones, stone-walled buildings, Mediterranean pines and glowing starlit sky. The dark and light figures against the background are put in economically, with swift brushstrokes. The underside of the outstretched awning is a powerful yellow and the walls, doors and windows of the café are an even richer, deeper yellow, while the glowing ochre of the floor throws forward the cool, pale tone of the tabletops. The whole effect is of a warm bright night with people relaxing, and eating and drinking, or just meeting each other.

This was probably Van Gogh's most prolific period before he succumbed to illness and mental breakdown, a time of expanding power and beauty in his work, with no cloud on the horizon. After this time he had to fit his work in between episodes of his illness, and he seems to have realized that he was not long for this world.







Public Garden with a Couple and a Blue Fir Tree, Arles 1888

and

Entrance to Public Garden at Arles, 1888

Van Gogh did several versions of these views while in Arles and, as previously in Paris where he had painted lovers in a garden, he may have been thinking of a *fête champêtre*, a view of tamed nature with people enjoying the setting. He thought that the area around Arles was similar in character to the landscapes in Japanese prints and said, 'I always pretend that I am in Japan here; and that consequently I only have to keep my eyes open and only have to paint what impresses me in my immediate surroundings.'

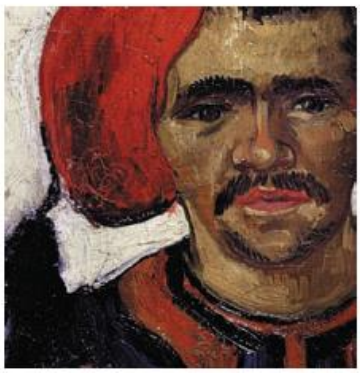
These paintings were intended to help decorate his house, so that when Gauguin arrived – for a long stay, he hoped – he would find his room decorated with colourful paintings of the area around Arles. These paintings illustrate Van Gogh's developing technique: thick impasto strokes of colour, making the marks follow the contours of the forms, so that not only the tone and colour give evidence of the space, but also the actual paint texture.



The Zouave, Arles 1888

This is a portrait that Van Gogh found very hard to paint because of the difficulty of putting together the strong colours of the uniform that contrasted with the ruddy brickwork beneath his feet. Certainly the red fez, the piping on the dark blue jacket and the soldier's suntanned face create sharp colour contrasts that could easily flatten or break up the portrait. However, Van Gogh seems to have managed to pull it together, although he wrote to his friend Emile Bernard that, '...it is harsh and all in all ugly and failed'. He wanted to produce paintings of common people with all the raw combinations of colours that this might entail, but he felt that he had not learnt to reconcile these difficult effects.

This elite French infantry regiment – the Zouave – was one of the French Empire's units that was raised and served in North Africa. Van Gogh was taken by the dashing uniform with baggy britches, a soft red fez, a large cummerbund and exotic braiding on the jacket. He spoke of the soldier as '...a boy with a small face, a bull neck and a tiger's glance', characteristics which he certainly managed to capture in a difficult but powerful image.



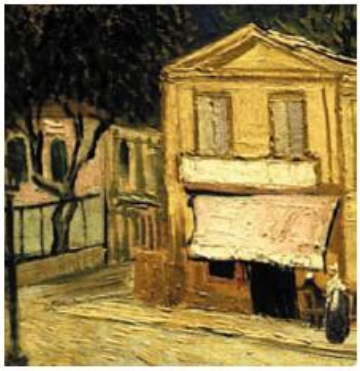


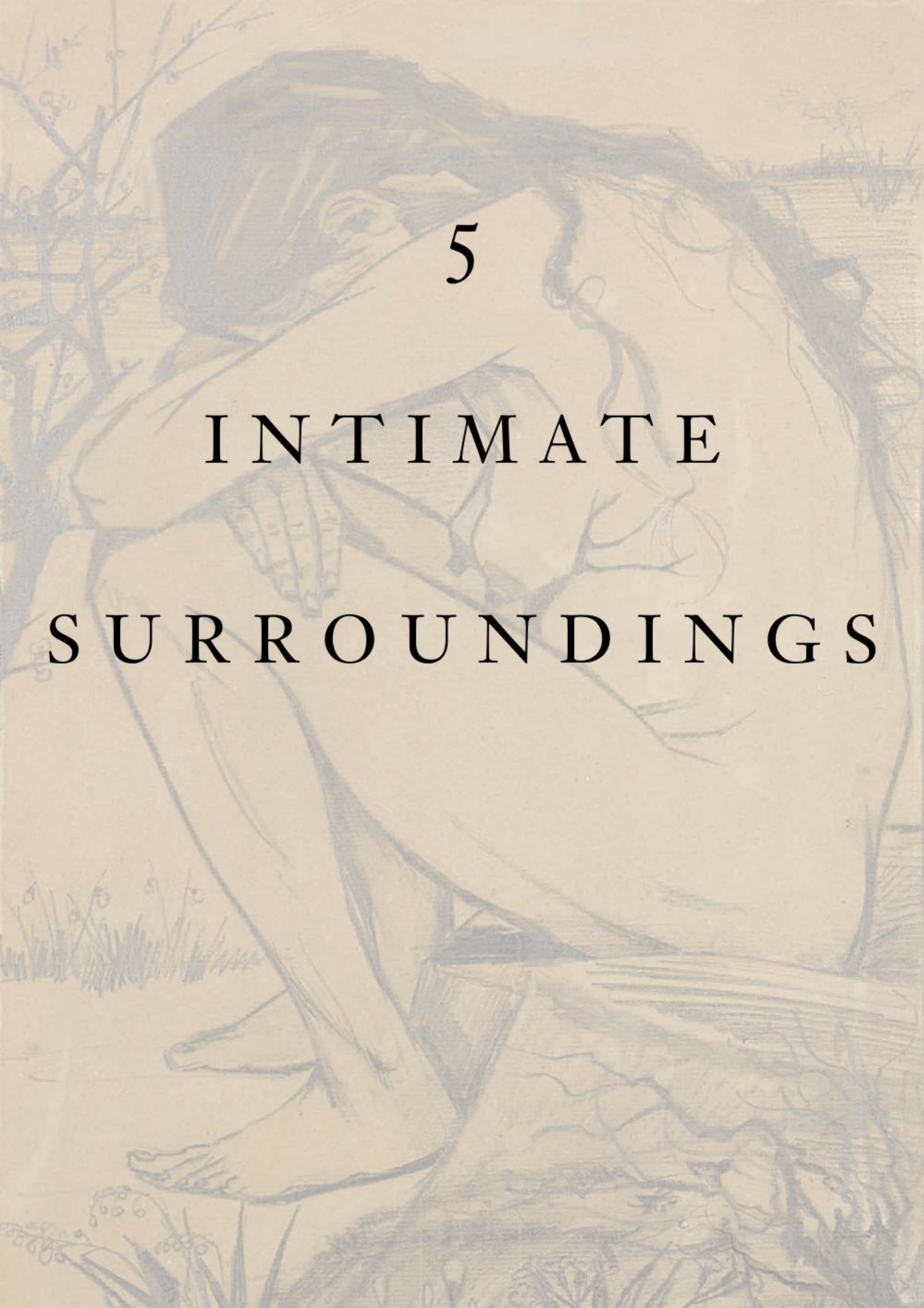
The Yellow House, Arles 1888

The Yellow House was where Van Gogh hoped to start a colony of artists dedicated to painting the sun-drenched south of France, possibly when on the way to Africa. He said that he would have liked to go to Africa had he been younger, but felt that France was the furthest he could venture. This was partly due to lack of money and partly due to his uncertain health.

Van Gogh only had use of the right side of the house in the painting, in Place Lamartine, Arles, and he hoped to redecorate it to be a true artist's house, cheaply but with character. He was most impressed by the colour contrast of the yellow house against the deep blue of the summer sky. The pink house with the green shutters under the trees (see the left of the detail below) is the restaurant where he ate each day. Unfortunately his dreams of an artists' colony did not materialize; Paul Gauguin came to stay but was eventually frightened away by Van Gogh's strange behaviour.

The departure of Gauguin was immediately followed by Van Gogh's first stay in hospital, the result of having cut off part of his ear. This event was probably brought on by the temperamental differences between the two artists, both being rather driven. Although Van Gogh's crazy action frightened Gauguin, the two men did correspond once or twice after the event.





5

INTIMATE SURROUNDINGS

Significant people and places

Many of Van Gogh's paintings were closely connected with his personal life and surroundings. He never kept his personal and public affairs very far apart. One of his Paris pictures shows the view from his room, marking his life-altering arrival there in 1886. The images of his rush-seated chair and of his bedroom at Arles now have iconic status and are as familiar to us as our own rooms and possessions.

Van Gogh always seems to touch the viewer and probably never so much as when we're looking at one of his self-portraits. He painted and drew over forty, most of them while he was living in Paris with Theo. He had hoped that portraiture would be a money-earner and invested in a good-quality mirror so he could practise on himself. What transpired was an ongoing record, not only of Van Gogh's appearance but also his attitude towards himself. Like Rembrandt before him, the self-portraits are a history of his life as an artist; he even painted two portraits with his severed ear covered in bandages.

Some of his portraits are of his family. There is a gentle little oil painting of his mother, and charcoal sketches made from photographs of his father, Theodorus van Gogh. He also painted his favourite sister, Willemina. It was Theo's suggestion that Van Gogh might work from photographs when models were scarce.

There is a striking sketch of a seated nude, entitled *Sorrow* (p.100). The model was Clasina Hoornik (Sien), the Hague prostitute that Van Gogh took in for nineteen months, together with her two children. He also drew Sien with the children, whom he cared for as his own.

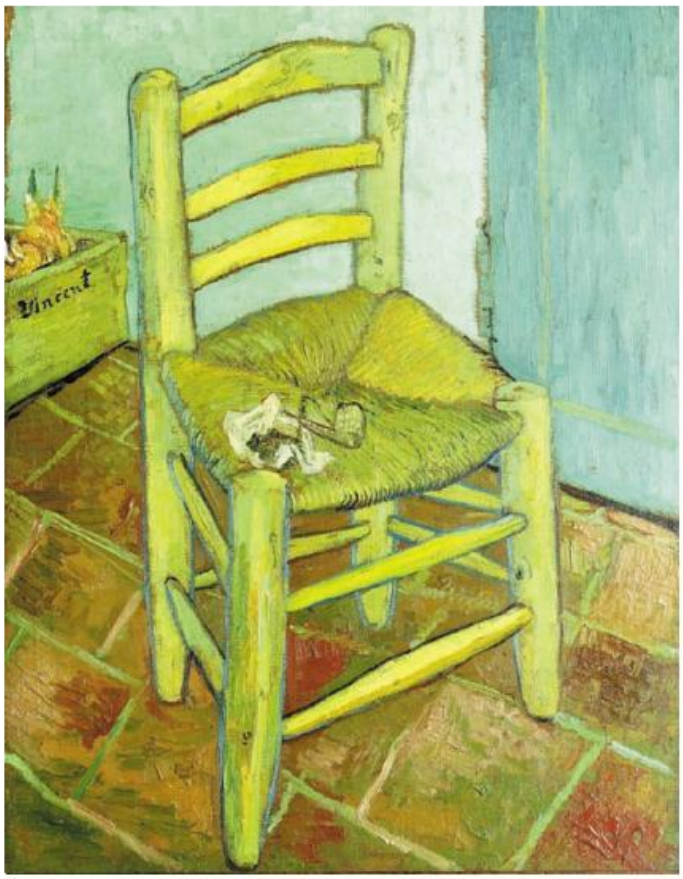
After threatening Gauguin and harming himself, Van Gogh struggled to carry on a normal existence in Arles. In May 1889, he chose to enter an asylum several miles away at St-Rémy. The doctors there immediately confined him to the house, so that they could keep him under observation. Making the most of the situation, Van Gogh set up his easel and painted the views from his window. These paintings, together with the letters to his brother Theo, give us a substantial view of Van Gogh's personal life, his passions, his mental stress and his remarkable artistic development.

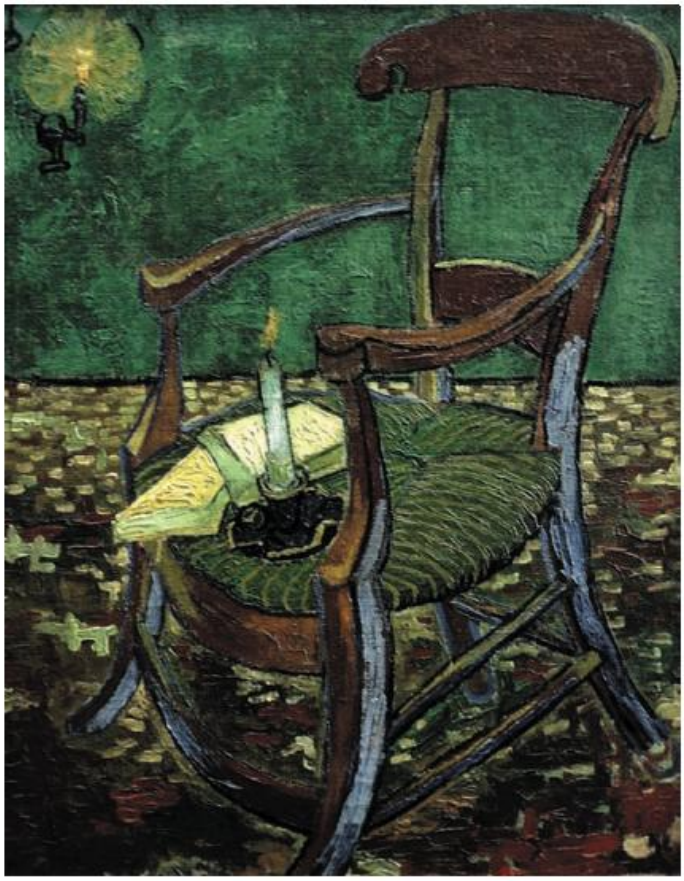


Vincent's Bedroom, Arles 1888

The famous painting of Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles has been reproduced so often that it is as familiar to many people as if they had lived there themselves. The rather small, plain room, which holds just a bed, a small table and a couple of chairs, is drawn and painted with Van Gogh's concept of Japanese prints in mind, in which there are no cast shadows and the colour is kept bright and clean. The slightly odd perspective of the far wall gives an effect of an acute angle in the corner at the bedhead, but it may just be Van Gogh's attempt to add a little extra depth to a room seen from the opposite corner. Van Gogh was too much of an expert in perspective for it to be unintentional so he must have been consciously ignoring the strict rules of linear perspective.

The excellent depiction of the foreshortened bed, and the chairs and table set at different angles to one another do help to give a feeling of the viewer being at almost a child's eye level. The warm colour of the bare floor contrasts with the pale blue walls and the green shutters give a hint of the sunlight outside, which helps to make this small room seem cheerful and comfortable. There are two portraits on the wall over the bed, one of the Belgian poet Eugene Block and the other of the young Lieutenant Milliet, whose success with the local women so impressed Van Gogh. The warm yellow of the furniture also gives the impression that Van Gogh was decidedly happy while painting this picture.


Vincent



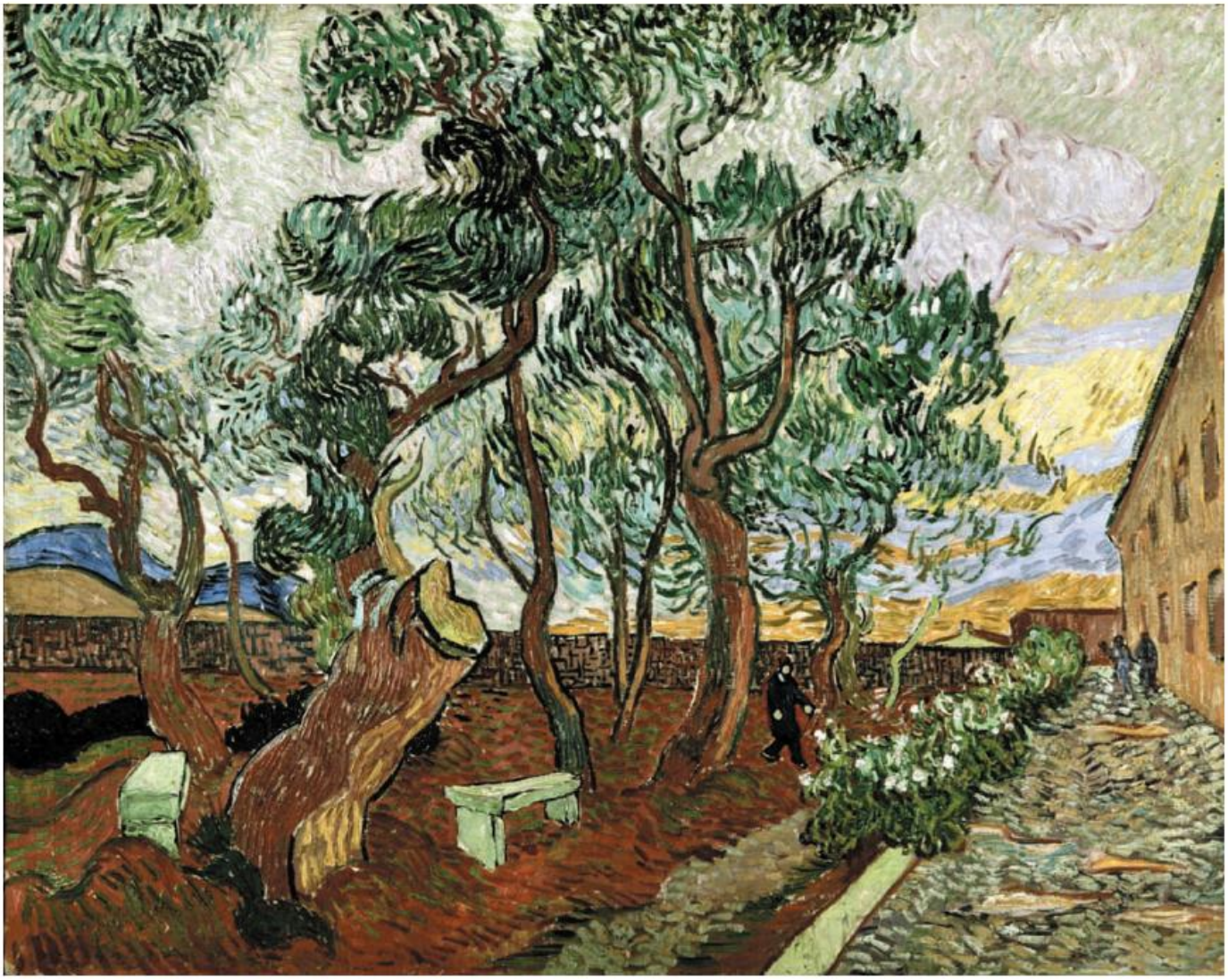
Vincent's Chair, Arles 1888

Van Gogh's chair matches the chairs in his bedroom and, considering his modest means, is indeed probably one of them. It is a simple chair of the type used by peasants: wooden, upright, with a seat woven from straw or rushes, in the yellowish tone of the natural materials. On the seat is Van Gogh's old pipe and a tobacco pouch, which somehow suggests his view of himself as a simple working painter with few personal needs or possessions.

Gauguin's Chair, Arles 1888

Van Gogh painted Gauguin's chair first, as a celebration of his friend coming to live with him in the Yellow House at Arles. This chair suggests a different character altogether, and one which Van Gogh appears to have found rather impressive. The chair was probably the best one in the house, being of a more sophisticated design than the yellow chair. The seat is more intricate and the objects on the seat, two yellow-covered books and a lighted candle in a holder, suggest the intellectual power of enlightenment that Van Gogh expected from Gauguin. The carpeted floor, of possibly the best room in the house, and the lamplight on the wall speak of a more urbane world than does the simple tiled floor and what looks to be a box of plants by Van Gogh's chair in his own room.

Two chairs, painted perhaps as symbols of the people who used them? The chairs are generally acknowledged to represent the status of the two friends as seen from Van Gogh's point of view. One wonders what Gauguin would have painted had he followed the same idea.

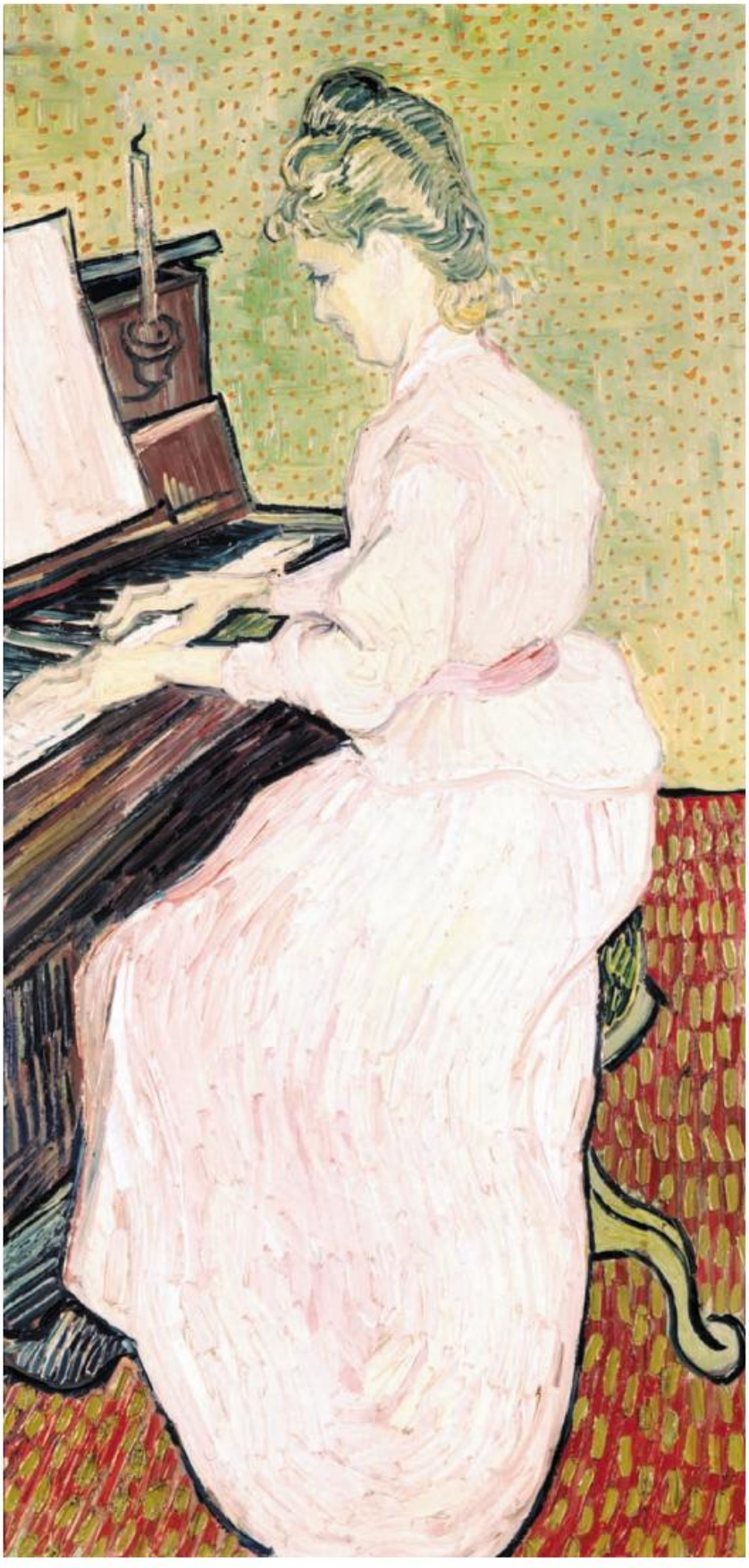


The Garden of Saint-Paul Hospital, St-Rémy 1889

This famous painting is the garden of the hospital where Van Gogh placed himself in order to be under the care of his doctor. While there, he continued to paint although his paints were confiscated on occasion as during the worse times of his illness he would try to eat them – an action that could have poisoned him.

Van Gogh wrote to Emile Bernard about this painting and commented on the power of red ochre and green darkened with grey or black. He likened this combination of colours to the 'black-red' anguish from which many of the patients at the hospital suffered.

This version is probably a worked-up version of the original that was painted on the spot; this can be deduced from the care with which the brushstrokes are placed and the systematic use of colour. The composition is very well set out, without any annoying oddities that sometimes appear in an outdoor painting. Despite its overall dark accent, with the ruddy streaks of the setting sun in the background and the systematic use of coloured marks, mixing and contrasting close to each other, the final result is neither overbearing nor depressing. The richness of the hot, red soil and the light streaks in the sky produce a strong solid-looking landscape.



Marguerite Gachet at the Piano, Auvers-sur-Oise 1890

This thickly-painted portrait of the daughter of Dr Gachet, Van Gogh's doctor and friend at Auvers-sur-Oise, shows that in his latter days he enjoying the civilized attentions of the small community that surrounded him. Some believe that Mademoiselle Gachet was in fact rather fond of Van Gogh. By this time, though, he seems to have felt himself beyond the reach of such tender emotions and put all his energy into his work.

The sympathetic portrait of the young woman in her white summer dress, set in a rather up-ended perspective of the room and piano, is painted thickly with solid brushstrokes in a mixture of whites which predominate over light blues, pinks and greens. The wonderful, rhythmic movement of the strokes of white paint down the folds of the skirt somehow evoke a musical atmosphere. The strong green wallpaper spotted with vermilion gives the figure a cool freshness by comparison. The piano, with its black angular outline, is painted-in almost crudely, but again makes the figure look softer and gentler in contrast. The girl's face expresses concentration as her long, delicate fingers move sensitively over the keyboard. This is a charming picture, which is remarkable when we think of the psychological disturbances that Van Gogh was suffering at this time.







Portrait of Theodorus Van Gogh (Van Gogh's father), Etten 1881 and Portrait of the Artist's Mother (from a photograph), Arles 1888

These portraits were painted seven years apart, and his father was dead by the time Van Gogh painted his mother's portrait. The picture of Theodorus was painted at Etten and offers a rather cold, unsympathetic view of the clergyman, who seemed to find his eldest son more of a trial than a benefit. The features look rather tired and repressed and give the impression that Theodorus was not a particularly successful practitioner of his vocation; respectable rather than godly, correct rather than compassionate. Van Gogh had many disagreements with his father, who told him on more than one occasion to leave the house. Van Gogh's religious beliefs and understanding of the teachings of Christ were very different from his father's. Theodorus did not understand his son at all and frequently despaired of him, which provoked violent reactions from Van Gogh. On the other hand, Van Gogh despaired of his father's narrowness of vision, based on what he thought of as 'clergyman's vanity'. The unfortunate consequence was that their relationship had little chance to develop happily.

The portrait of Van Gogh's mother was painted at Arles, from a small black and white photograph of her. He wrote at the time, 'I am working on a portrait of Mother. Because the black and white photograph annoys me so. Ah. What portraits could be made from nature with photography and painting. I always hope that we are still to have a great revolution in portraiture…'.

Certainly this portrait seems to have seen beyond the photographic image. Van Gogh has created a distinctly animated portrait of his mother; her eyes gleam with life. A very sympathetic and strong image that tells us something about his feelings for her.



Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear, Arles 1889

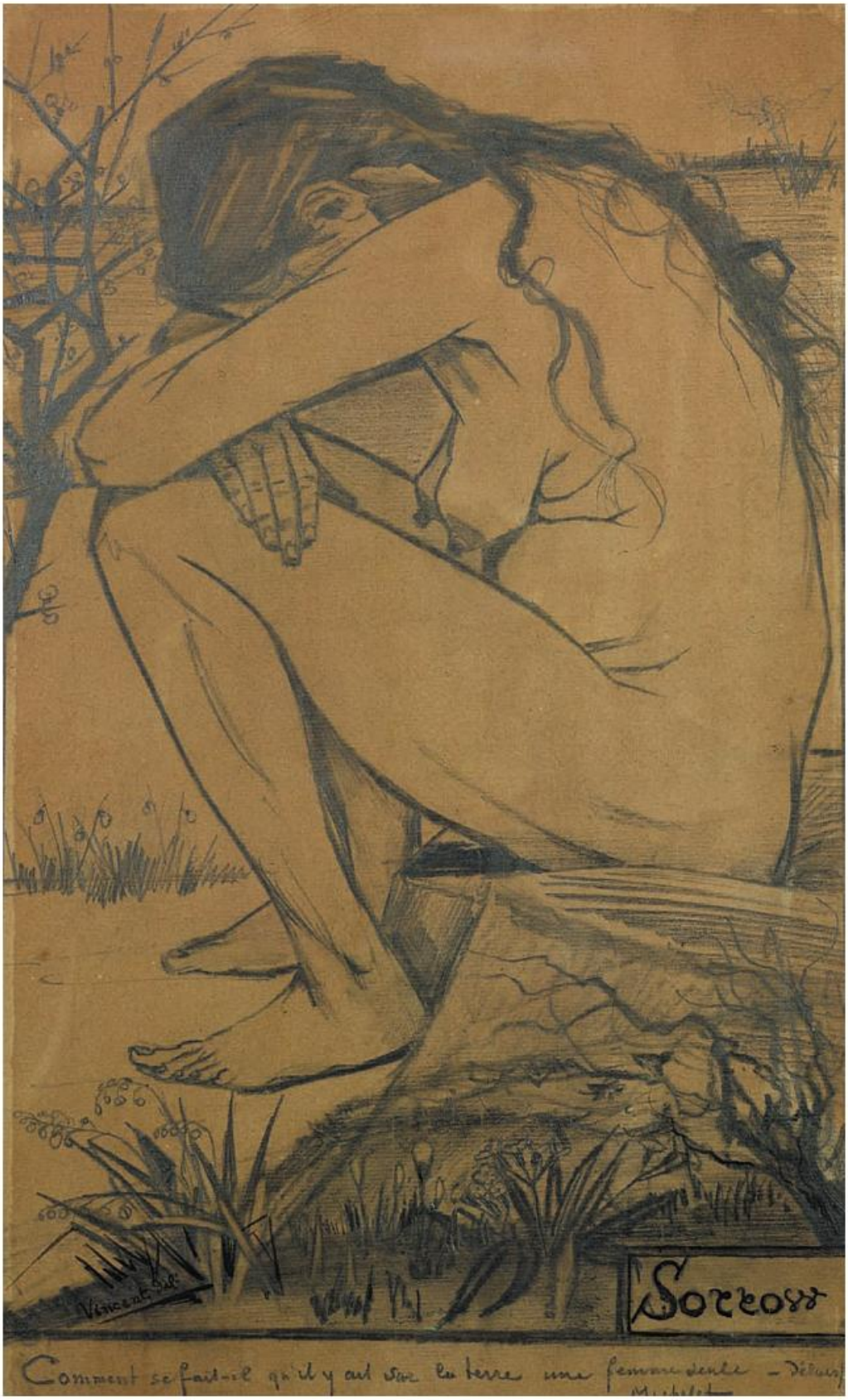
This self-portrait was painted soon after Van Gogh's break with Gauguin and his self-mutilation episode, and shows his gaunt features after leaving the asylum. The hat hides his shaven head and the bandage on his injured ear. Van Gogh, writing just before he left the hospital, appeared quite detached regarding the situation, as the following extracts from his letters demonstrate: 'I shall stay here at the hospital for a few days more, then I think I can count on returning to the house very quietly...'

Later he wrote: 'I assure you that some days in the hospital were very interesting, and perhaps it is from the sick that one learns to live. I hope I have just simply had an artist's fit...

'It astonishes me already when I compare my condition today with what it was a month ago...I knew...that one could fracture one's legs and arms and recover afterwards, but I did not know that you could fracture the brain in your head and recover from that too...Let me go on quietly with my work; if it is that of a madman, well, so much the worse. I can't help it...And if we are a bit mad what of it? Perhaps someday everyone will have neurosis...

'Instead of eating enough...I kept myself going on coffee and alcohol. I admit all that, but all the same it is true that to attain the high yellow note that I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well keyed up...I have been in a hole all my life, and my mental condition is not only vague now, but has always been so, so that whatever is done for me, I cannot think things out so as to balance my life. Where I have to follow a rule, as here in the hospital, I feel at peace.'

This self-portrait shows that despite his difficult circumstances and mental instability Van Gogh was able to produce an extremely powerful painting, with humanity in the eyes and a certain playfulness in the colour scheme. He was still able to respond to the world in a controlled way but, as he said, '...I shall always be cracked'.


Sorrow
Comment se fait-il qu'il y ait sur la terre une femme seule – Michelet

Sorrow (Sien), The Hague 1882

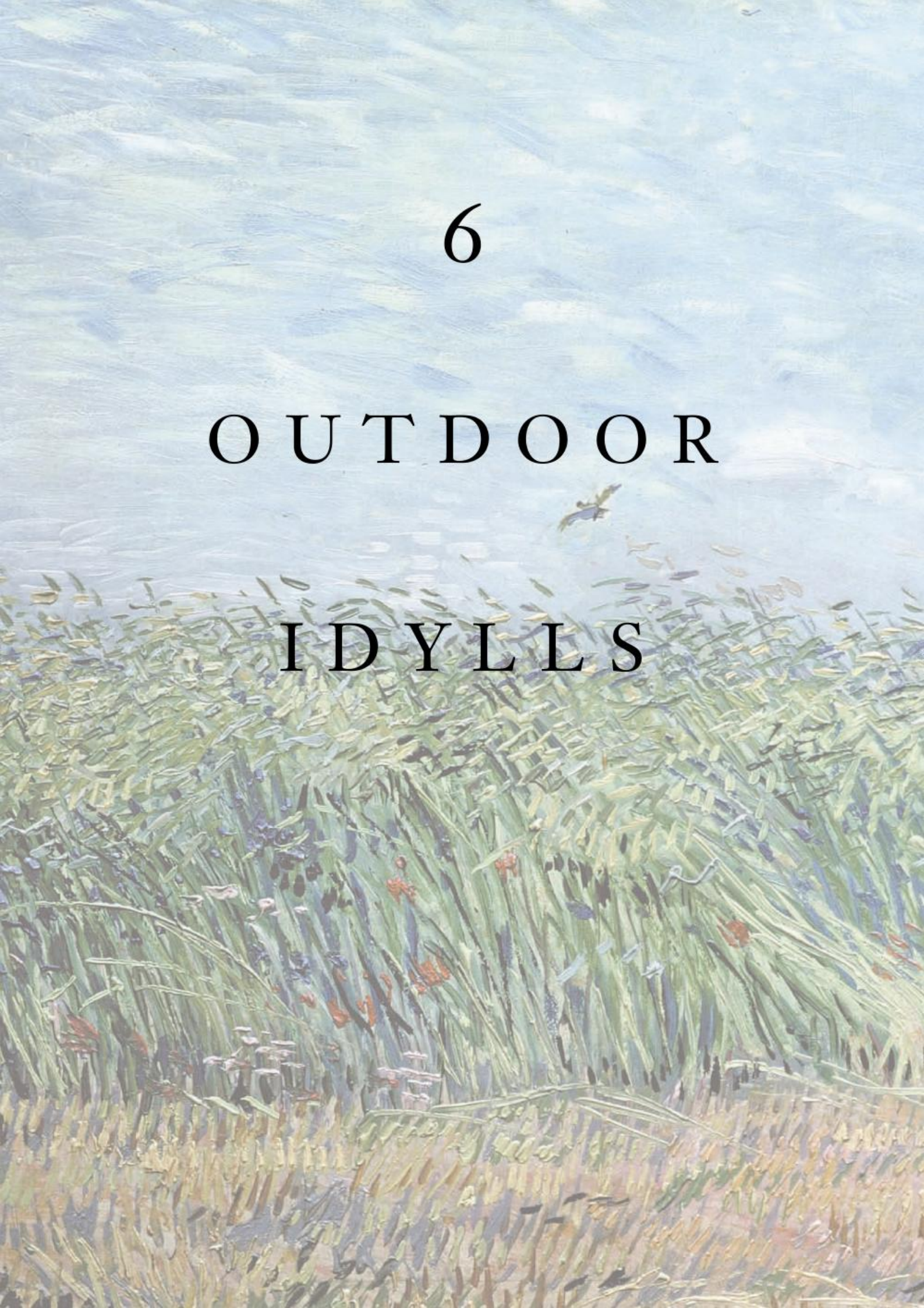
This is a drawing of Sien, the former prostitute who shared a home with Van Gogh for a time while he was in The Hague. When Van Gogh took her in she was pregnant and addicted to drink. He was determined to save her from wretchedness and ill health, and after the baby arrived acted as its father. Their association ended when Van Gogh ran out of funds and returned to his parents; Sien, under the influence of her mother, reverted to her previous life as a prostitute.

In return for providing a home for her, Van Gogh used Sien as a model. In this drawing Van Gogh symbolizes the sorrow that he felt was embodied in her station in life. This image is thought to be the only nude study he made of her, which is somewhat surprising given the circumstances.



6

OUTDOOR IDYLLS



Carefully chosen views of nature

Idyllic landscapes are usually thought of as those where the trees and flowers, the sense of space and the gentle sky overhead, combine to convey a general feeling of delight in the natural world. We know that Van Gogh spent a great deal of his boyhood wandering the woods and heathland surrounding his home. An awkward child, he felt happier away from the busy parsonage, which was always besieged by his father's parishioners.

As an adult, Van Gogh's overflowing response to the power of nature found its best outlet in his art. Naturally, he was profoundly moved by the elements and by the sheer grandeur of some places but he believed a landscape that had been worked on by men and women was more beautiful than the wilderness. And he compared his task of painting to 'ploughing my canvases as they do in the fields'.

Many of Van Gogh's idylls were located away from broad horizons in enclosed gardens, often with an abundance of flowers. Drawn to a mixture of buildings and vegetation, he would select views of towns or small rural settlements set in a landscape with sky, hills and trees. Even as a young man, far away from home, he had stored such images on his inner eye: '…chestnut trees with their burden of yellow leaves and the bright blue sky, and through the tops of those trees the part of Richmond that lies on the hill, the houses with their red roofs…and green gardens…the great grey bridge with the tall poplars on either side.'

He revelled in the variety of shapes found among the wild trees of Provence, and equally, the carefully pruned and espaliered examples in the parks, gardens and allotments around Paris. His great delight was, of course, the cypress tree and he became almost the master of the cypress in all its vigorous density: 'As beautiful of line and proportion as an Egyptian obelisk.'

Finally, for Van Gogh there was the more abstract idyll of tranquillity, a quality that he sought constantly, in order to produce his paintings unimpeded by stress and anxiety: 'Of course my moods change but the average is serenity. I have a firm faith in art…a powerful stream which carries a man to harbour.'



Field with Poppies, Auvers-sur-Oise 1890

In this particular painting, Van Gogh has used a stripped-down Impressionist technique that concentrates on expressing the mood of the scene as much as the light. The sky consists of deep blue and white brushstrokes, which sometimes mix and produce an intermediate blue tone. The trees stand out as dark green stalks against this sky and the far-off hills and hedges are a strong fresh green. The closer foreground is painted with green and ochre colours, mixed to produce a warmer green background, and across this are spattered and massed hundreds of bright red poppy heads, mostly painted with one dab of the brush. Occasionally a dark stalk penetrates the blanket of poppy petals but mostly it is the strong red flower heads that hold the eye. They have a rich, romantic quality but are also somehow rather sinister – like blood spattered across the field. One month after this was painted, whilst walking in fields like these, Van Gogh shot himself.





Landscape in the Rain, Auvers-sur-Oise 1890

This unusual landscape was one of Van Gogh's very last pieces of work. The yellow wheatfields, the blue-grey sky, the blue-green trees and hedges, and the pallid roofs of the houses look rather sad after the magnificent southern landscapes painted in the Midi region.

On top of the mostly horizontal bands of colour and texture there are slashing strokes of paint, dry-brushed in grey, blue and black, criss-crossing the whole painting like a screen. This veil of rain makes the whole scene gloomy, and the mood takes another downward turn thanks to the black crows winging their way heavily across the tops of the crops in the foreground. The entire scene is imbued with a sad, damp feel, such as you might find on a dreary autumn day, but without the colours of autumn. Maybe it is just the effect of a rainy day in July, the middle of summer, rather than an intimation of Van Gogh's impending death.



Edge of a Wheatfield with Poppies and a Lark, Paris 1887

During his stay in Paris Van Gogh often visited the local countryside to paint landscapes where he was able to work on lightening his palette at the same time as he practised Impressionist techniques. His notes from this period mention his artist's appreciation for the colour yellow, which at Arles and later on played such a large part in his palette.

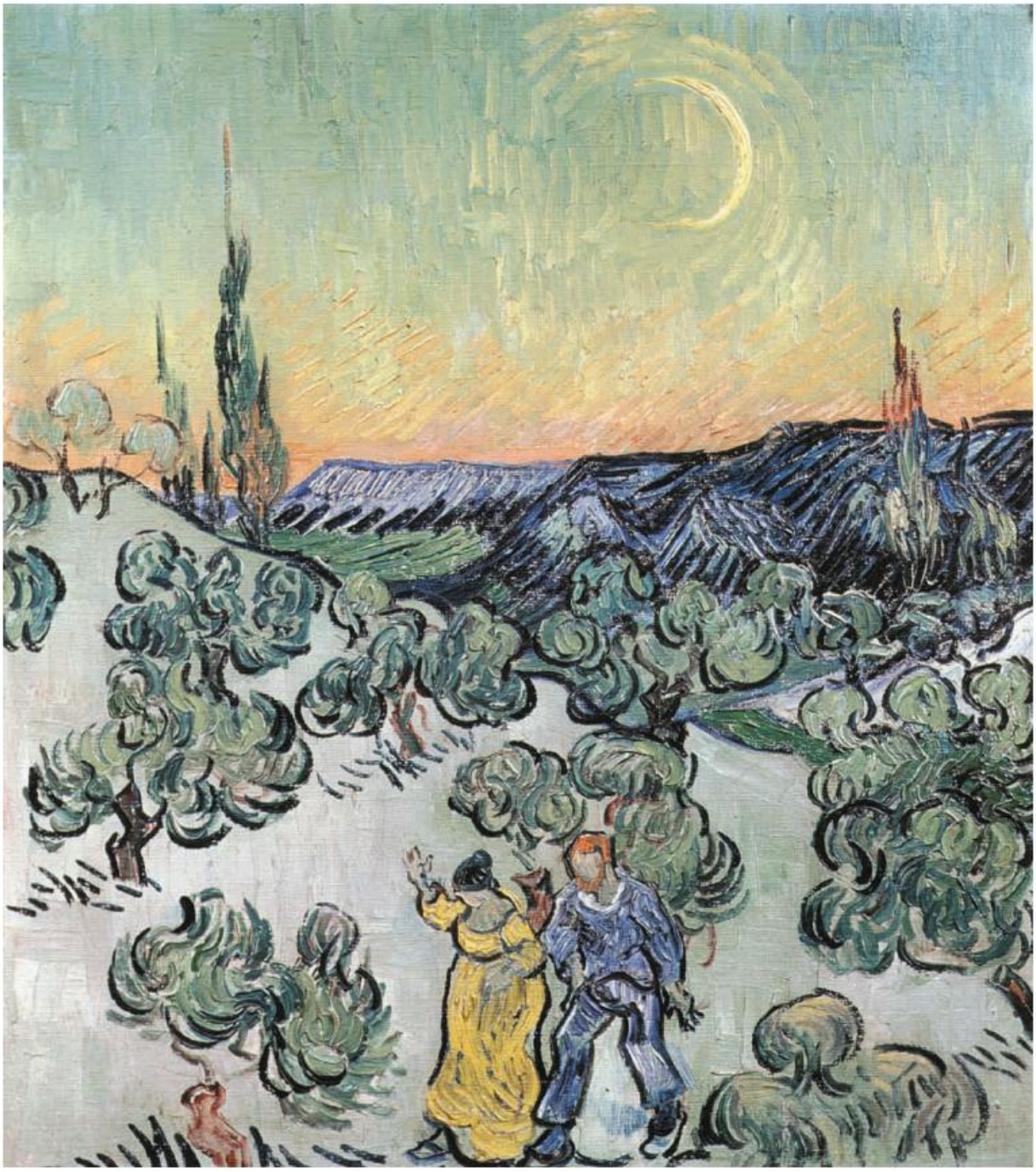
Van Gogh was a keen lover of the countryside and nature, and he found the clamour and bustle of Paris rather too much for his nervous condition. This picture shows his appreciation of the movement of the wind in the wheat, the sparse clouds overhead and a lark rising from the ground to sing in the sky.

The picture is mostly a balance of yellows and blues, with a yellowish-green and ochre to balance out the tones. There are a few very dark marks and a sprinkle of red poppies among the blades of wheat. Van Gogh used an extremely simple design of three horizontal layers, with the sky taking up half the picture and the wheat more than a quarter of the remainder. Small strokes of strong colour have been brushed thickly as stubble in the foreground and smudged softly as clouds, giving a nice textural contrast to the long blades of wheat whose ears are painted with small flicks of paint across the top of the crop band.



Allée Des Alyscamps, Arles 1888

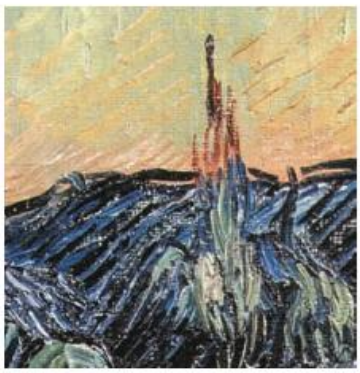
Van Gogh's painting of this avenue, along which Roman sarcophagi line the edges of the walk, was done while Gauguin was still at Arles. The picture is of the avenue in autumn, with red and yellow leaves scattered across the path, against which the figures are silhouetted. The burning colours of the pathway and the trees set against a blue sky make a glowing statement of autumn in the Midi region of France. The contrast of the sky, the trunks of the trees and the gravestones with the flaming autumn leaves produces a potent image of nature in the southern climate that had so transformed Van Gogh's palette and techniques. This area, steeped as it was in ancient history, may have been where Van Gogh and Gauguin strolled while they talked of art and artists.



A Walk in the Dusk, St-Rémy 1889

This strange and rather unsettling painting, which looks like a sketch of an idea rather than a complete work, has a dream-like quality with its two figures, one gesticulating, walking through groves of olive trees with the hint of hills and cypresses in the background. The sky is lit by the setting sun, with a large, pale crescent moon dominating the space. It resembles an illustration for a story and was probably painted from memory when Van Gogh was in hospital in St-Rémy.

The pale area in the foreground and the bright sky are good evocations of dusk, but can be seen as a vision of Van Gogh's state of mind rather than what he directly observed from nature. The painting is schematic in its rendering of trees, figures and distant hills. An interesting but unresolved work.





Landscape with House, Auvers-sur-Oise 1890

This extended landscape, with a reaper in the field and a carriage on the road, is full of activity and was painted in the final year of Van Gogh's life. Across the horizon, where the blue sky, put in with short brushstrokes, meets the land, a dark goods train travels across the picture, leaving a trail of pale clouds of smoke in its track. The plantation of trees anchors the left upper corner of the flat land, and the red-roofed houses in the middle right of the picture give a strong focal point to help place the low-lying foreground and the distant patchwork of fields. The whole picture is a careful composition that is unlikely to have been painted directly from life but probably from a drawing already in existence. The viewpoint is very high, looking down on the foreground, and although everything looks naturalistic enough the painting of each part is very much reduced to a systematic set of brushstrokes. This painting includes many of Van Gogh's favourite motifs: a field enclosed by a wall, a reaper, a carriage on the road and a train in the distance.



Blossoming Trees, Arles 1888

Van Gogh spoke of wanting to paint the orchards of Arles in blossom: 'I have been working on a size 20 canvas in the open air in an orchard, lilac ploughland, a reed fence, two pink peach trees against a sky of glorious blue and white. Probably the best landscape I have done.'

It must have been painted early in 1888 when spring blossom was on the trees and, apart from a painting titled *Souvenir de Mauve*, in memory of his mentor – a distant cousin – in Holland who had recently died, this orchard gives an idea of the effect that these abundantly blossoming fruit trees had on Van Gogh's new-found colour palate.

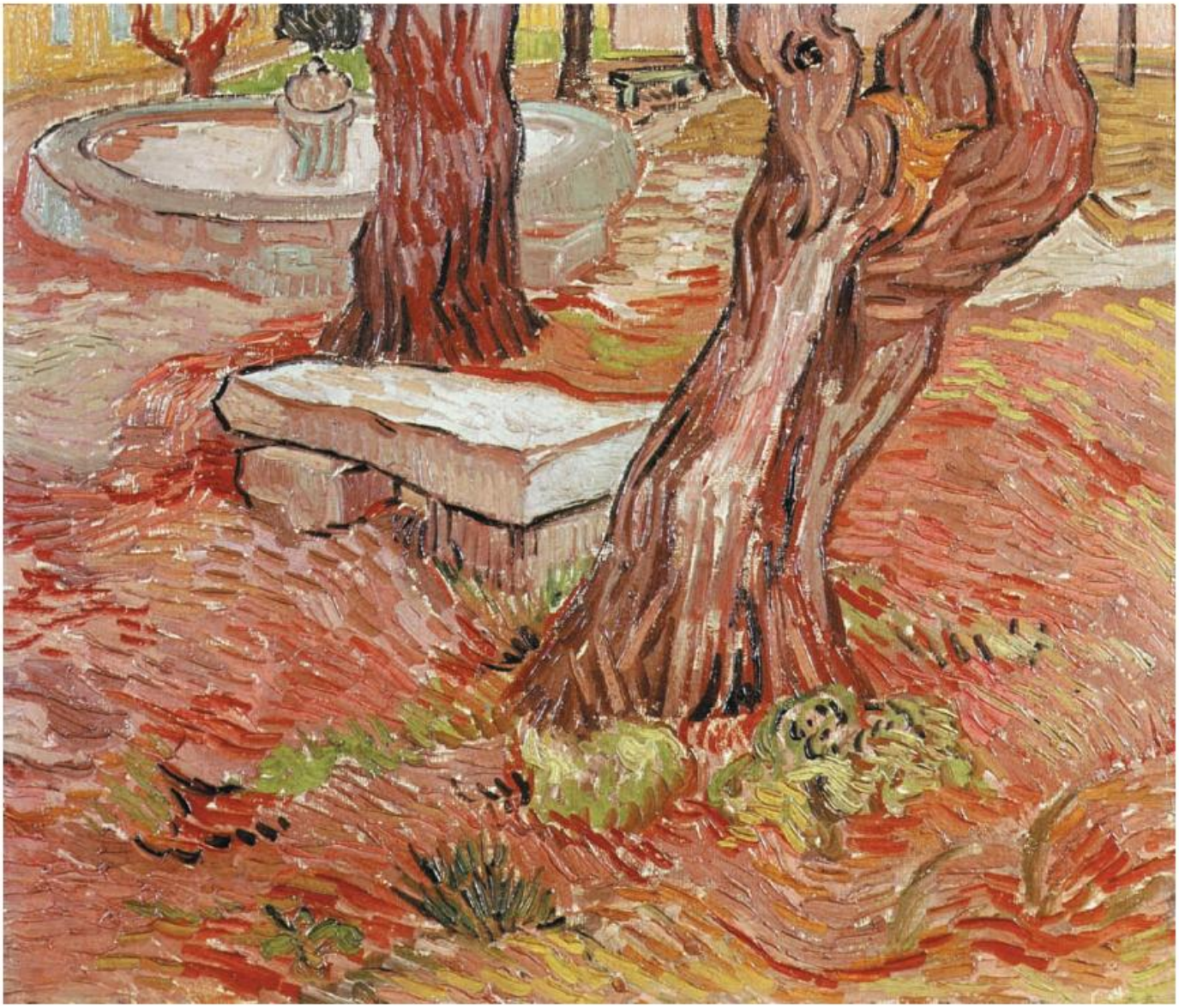
The architecture of the trunks and branches is shown against the spring sky, but the feathery blossoms produce a rich haze of light and colour which reduces the harsh angularity of the trees. A feast for our eyes and for Van Gogh at the time of painting.



Fishing in Spring, Paris 1887

Van Gogh's exploration of the Impressionists' method of painting became highly effective in a very short time. This typical impressionist scene of a fisherman in his punt on the Seine was painted while Van Gogh was in Paris, where he was greatly influenced by contemporary, modern artists.

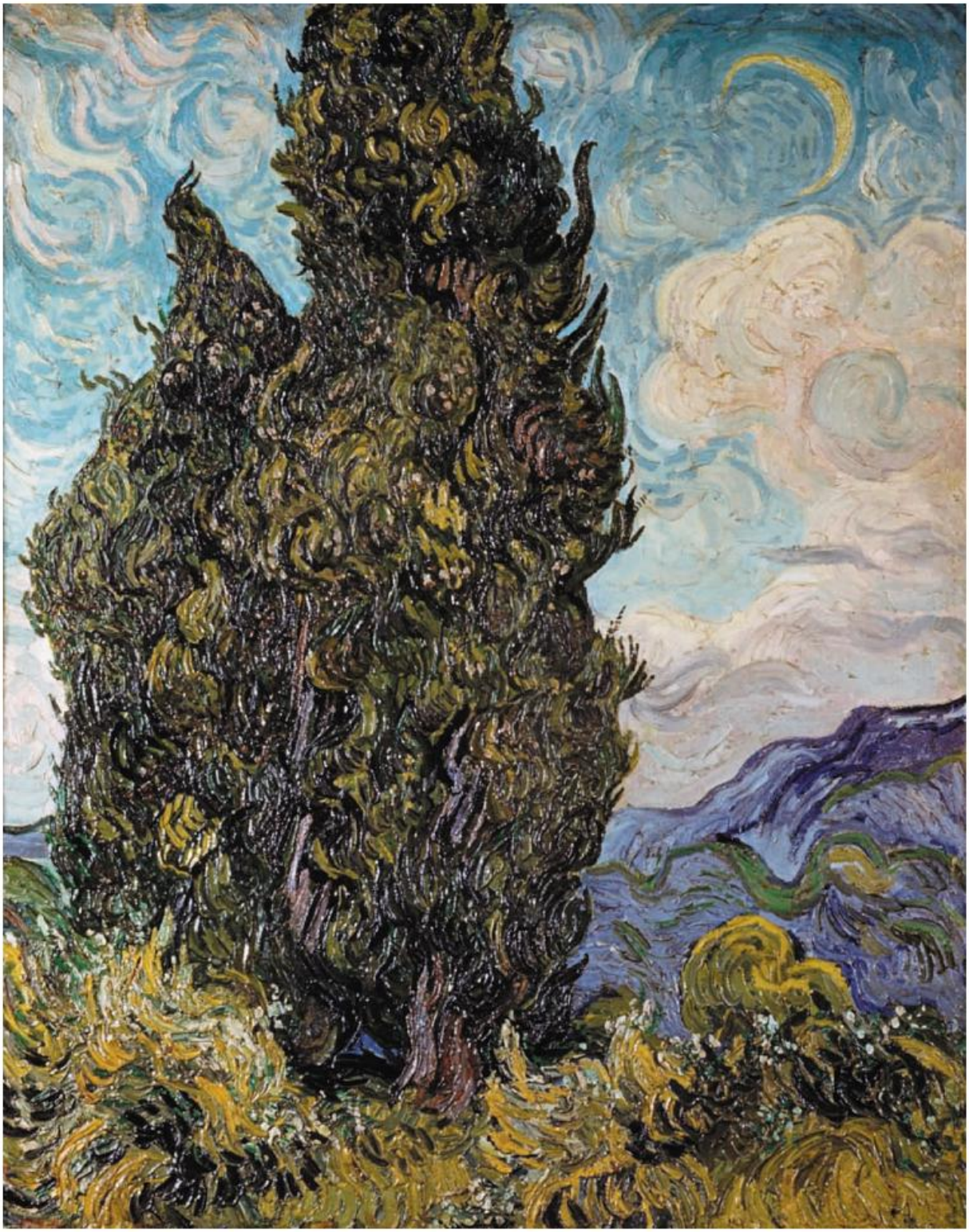
The picture is very much of the type painted by the Impressionists in the previous decade. It has all the freshness of Renoir and Pissarro, with light, bright colours and an airy atmosphere emphasized by the feathery leaves on the trees and the combination of blue and yellow contrasts in the water and background. The contrast between the arch of the bridge and the verticals of the tree-trunks holds the whole design together. The boats float across the lower half of the picture giving movement, and the soft, airy background gives depth. A first-rate artistic endeavour by a painter relatively new to this style.



Stone Seat, Arles 1889

This interesting view of a stone seat, the stone fountain behind and the cut-off trunks of trees across the centre was produced during Van Gogh's time in the asylum at Arles. It is remarkable – given Van Gogh's illness – that he was able to produce paintings that give little or no hint of his disturbed state of mind: this is a very peaceful piece of work, yet strong and powerful. The warm colours and strong directional brushstrokes make this composition a substantial statement of space and solidity.





Cypresses, St-Rémy 1888

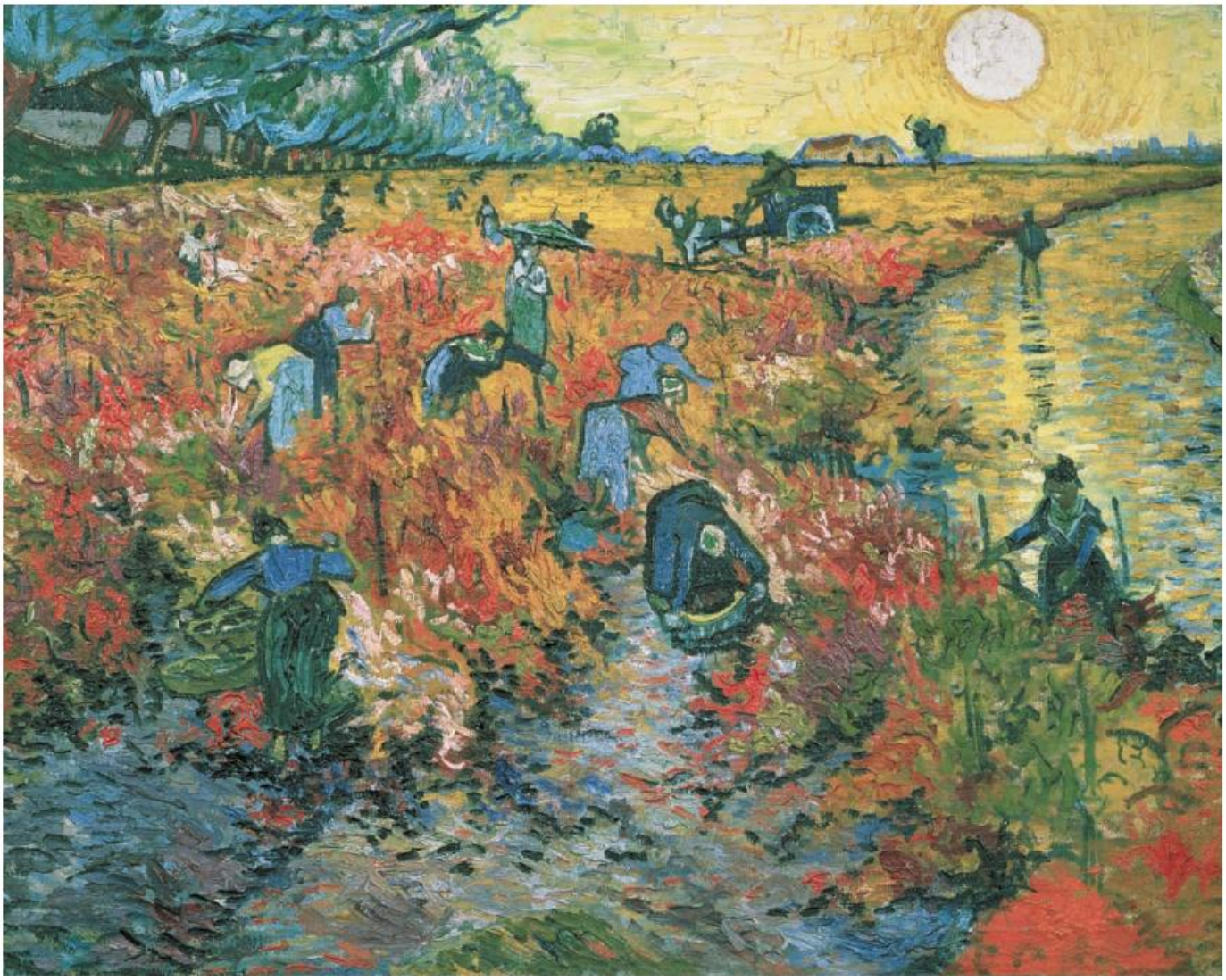
Van Gogh made vigorous studies of the cypresses near St-Rémy before he produced this painting, with its distant view across the landscape to the low mountains in the distance. He has taken the natural curl and sweep of the cypress trees and increased their undulations to create a flame-like flicker of dark tree shapes that seem to burn into the viewer's vision. As they are placed in the hot, yellow and blue landscape of the Midi region, the contrast makes their dark shape potent, almost mesmerizing. 'The cypresses are always occupying my thoughts, I should like to make something of them, like the canvases of the sunflowers, because it astonishes me that they have not yet been done as I see them...the green has such a quality of distinction. It is a splash of black in a sunny landscape, but it is one of the most interesting black notes, and the most difficult to hit off exactly that I can imagine...'.

There is no doubt that Van Gogh cypress trees writhe with vigour, and no-one who paints cypresses today can help but be influenced by his view of their static turbulence. In this picture the sky above and landscape below echo the movement of the cypresses in the brushstrokes of the artist.



Green Stalks of Corn, Arles 1888

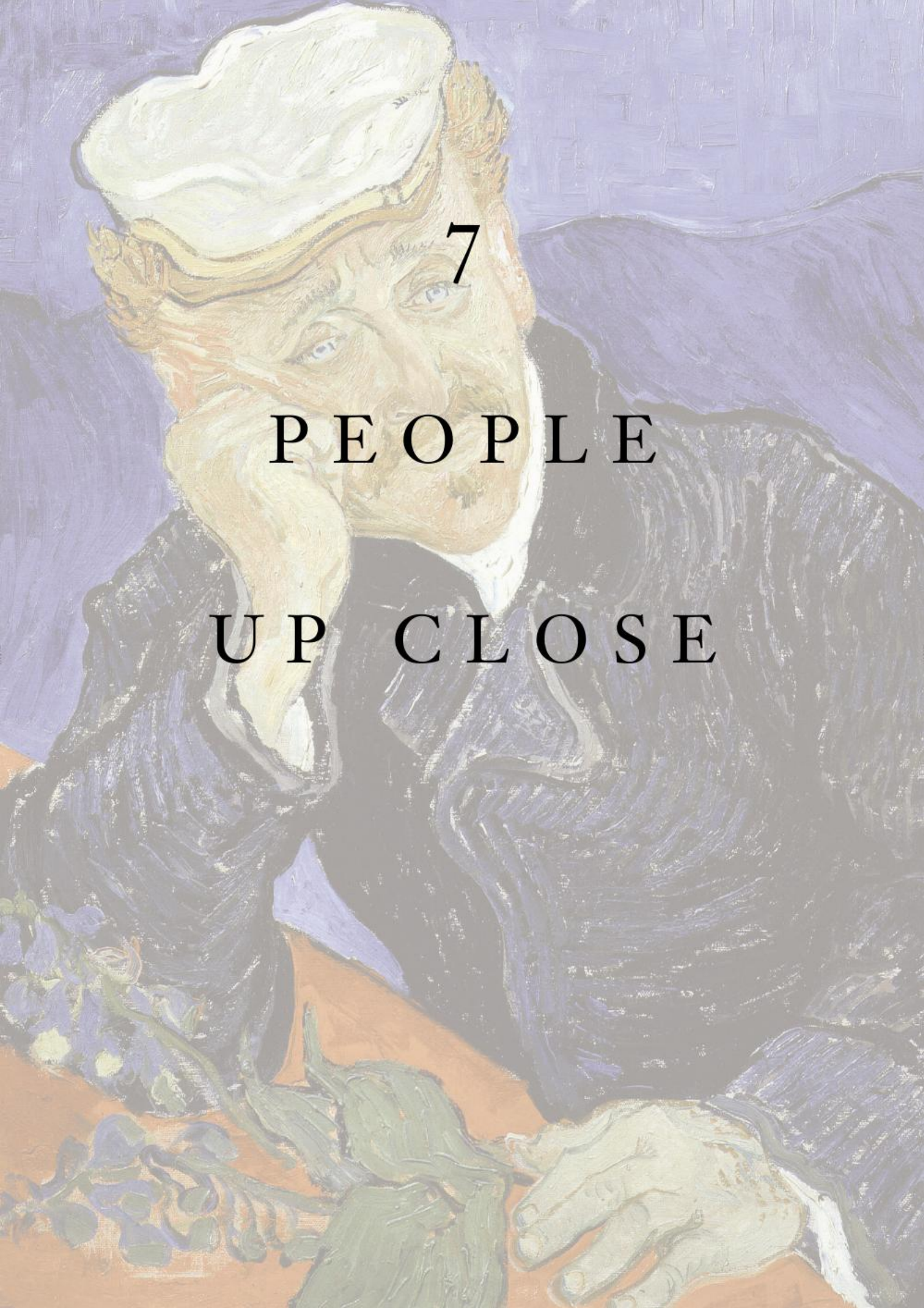
This detailed painting of corn stalks poking sentinel-straight up into the sky, with a mass of red poppies carpeting the foreground, has a low viewpoint and must have been painted as Van Gogh sat on the ground or worked from the lower level of a ditch.The distant tree line is softened to a smoky blue against a milky blue sky; evidently a slightly overcast June day in the Midi, with streaks of sunlit ground showing in the distance. Van Gogh had painted pictures with this central horizon and low viewpoint before, in order to show the abundance of the lush fields of green corn and flowers under the southern sky.



Red Vineyards, Arles 1888

'...what is beautiful in the south are the vineyards, but they are in the flat country or the hillsides. I have seen some, and even sent a picture of them to Theo, in which the vineyard was quite purple, fire-red, and yellow and green and violet, like the Virginia Creeper in Holland. I like to see the vineyard as much as a wheatfield. Besides, the hills full of thyme and other aromatic plants are very nice here, and because of the clearness of the air, from the heights one can see so much farther than at home.'

This rich and potent, red, yellow and blue painting gives us a view of Provence with the sun either rising or setting and crowds of peasant farmers harvesting the grape crop from the vineyards. The blue cast of the figures sets them sharply against the red leaves of the vines and the stream alongside, reflecting the yellow sunlight, balances the blue tree line on the other side. A scene of industry and fruitfulness, wonderfully crafted by Van Gogh.



7

PEOPLE UP CLOSE

Friends, acquaintances and their children

Van Gogh's portraits have always had an immediate appeal. It lies in the rich colour contrasts he used for flesh and clothing, and also in the dramatic delineation of the sitters' features, which he tended to almost carve out of the paint. There is something engaging too in the way that he placed some heads against a particular background, as in the case of the postman, Joseph Roulin, and his flowery wallpaper.

Van Gogh used an intriguing method of painting whereby rather than painting the turned-away side of the face darker, he chose to paint it close in tone to the lighter side but in a significantly different colour. He became expert at playing cool colours against warm. Nor was he afraid of putting a bold outline to features, which he managed without being clumsy or harsh, or making the portrait look like a caricature.

In Antwerp, Van Gogh's portraits, like most of his work, had followed the style of the old Dutch masters. This meant paintings of extreme contrast in tonal values and in a narrow colour range. Once in Paris, where his palette lightened, he explored the theories and methods of the Impressionists and Pointillists. This examination of colour and the resultant extreme palette remained a major preoccupation of Van Gogh's and helped him towards the essentially modern portraits of his final years.

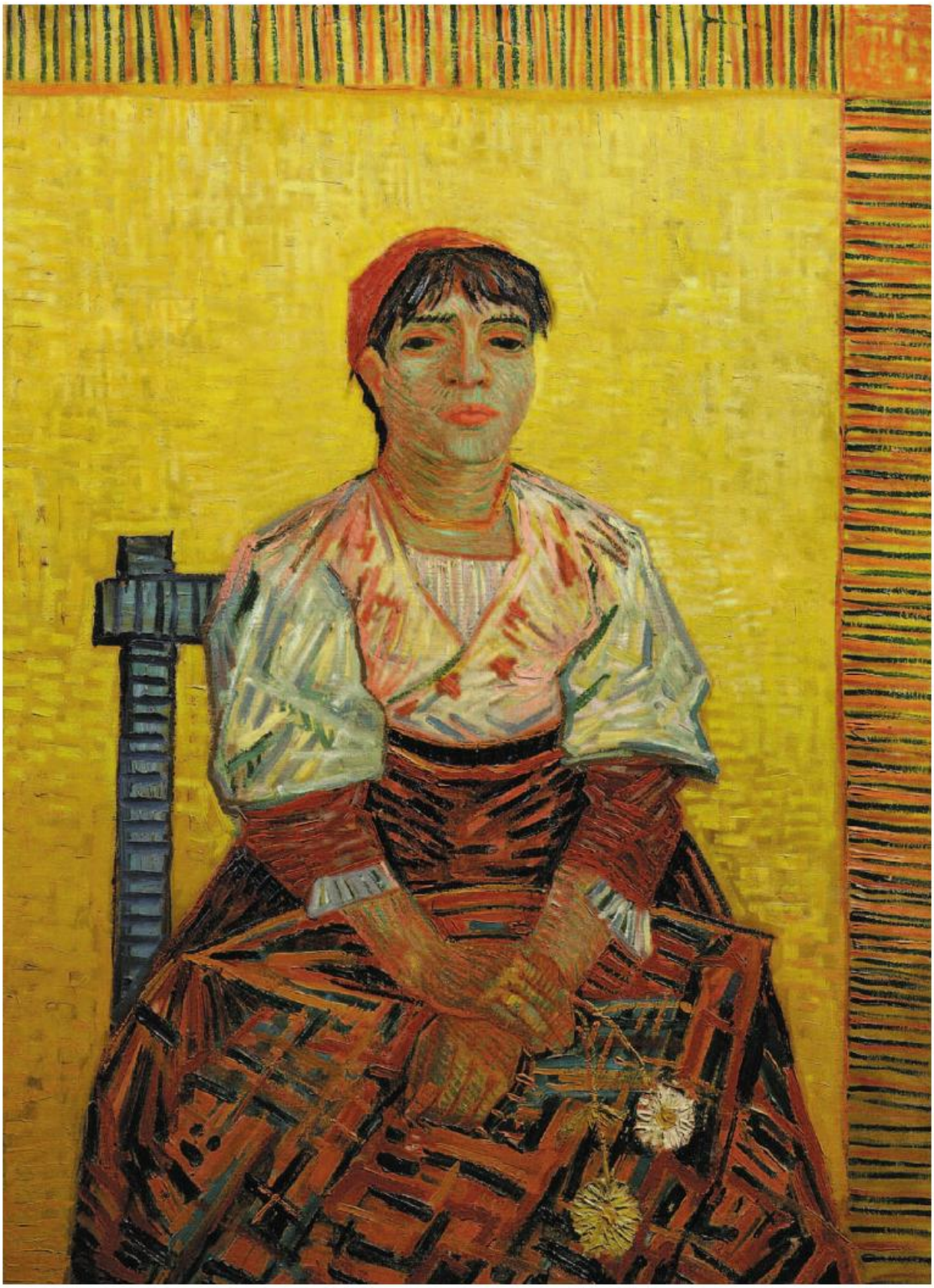
Looking at Van Gogh's portraits, viewers sense a response from the face in the frame. Perhaps because his own emotions were always so near the surface, Van Gogh knew how to evoke the vulnerability, the innocence and also the more guarded characteristics of his subjects. We can infer things from a glance or maybe the angle of a head. His brushstrokes both define and transmit the body-language of the sitter and suggest how they might be reacting to the situation.

Wherever he found himself living, Van Gogh set about portraying his neighbours. His eccentricities and rough manners concealed a deep concern for the human condition and an instinct for conviviality. As his close friend, the painter Emile Bernard wrote after his death: 'People who had known him a little…liked him because he was so good-hearted, so human…'



Reclining nude, Paris 1887

This is one of the few nude studies of Van Gogh's that remain, probably done at the studio of Fernand Corman where he stayed for only two or three months. The quality of the painting is traditional, in the manner of the time, and was probably one of his life-class studies, although it may have been worked up in the studio later. It is a very much softer form than the drawings he produced at the Antwerp Academy in 1886 and shows how the Parisian techniques of painting were beginning to change his style. He has lightened his palette considerably, using a pale, boudoir-style background which gives the figure a warmer colour in comparison. It is clear that Van Gogh learnt very quickly: the fleshiness of this figure is a far cry from the work he had been doing before coming to Paris. The ability to produce a firm but soft tactile image of the human figure is not easily come by, but Van Gogh seems to have achieved it very quickly.

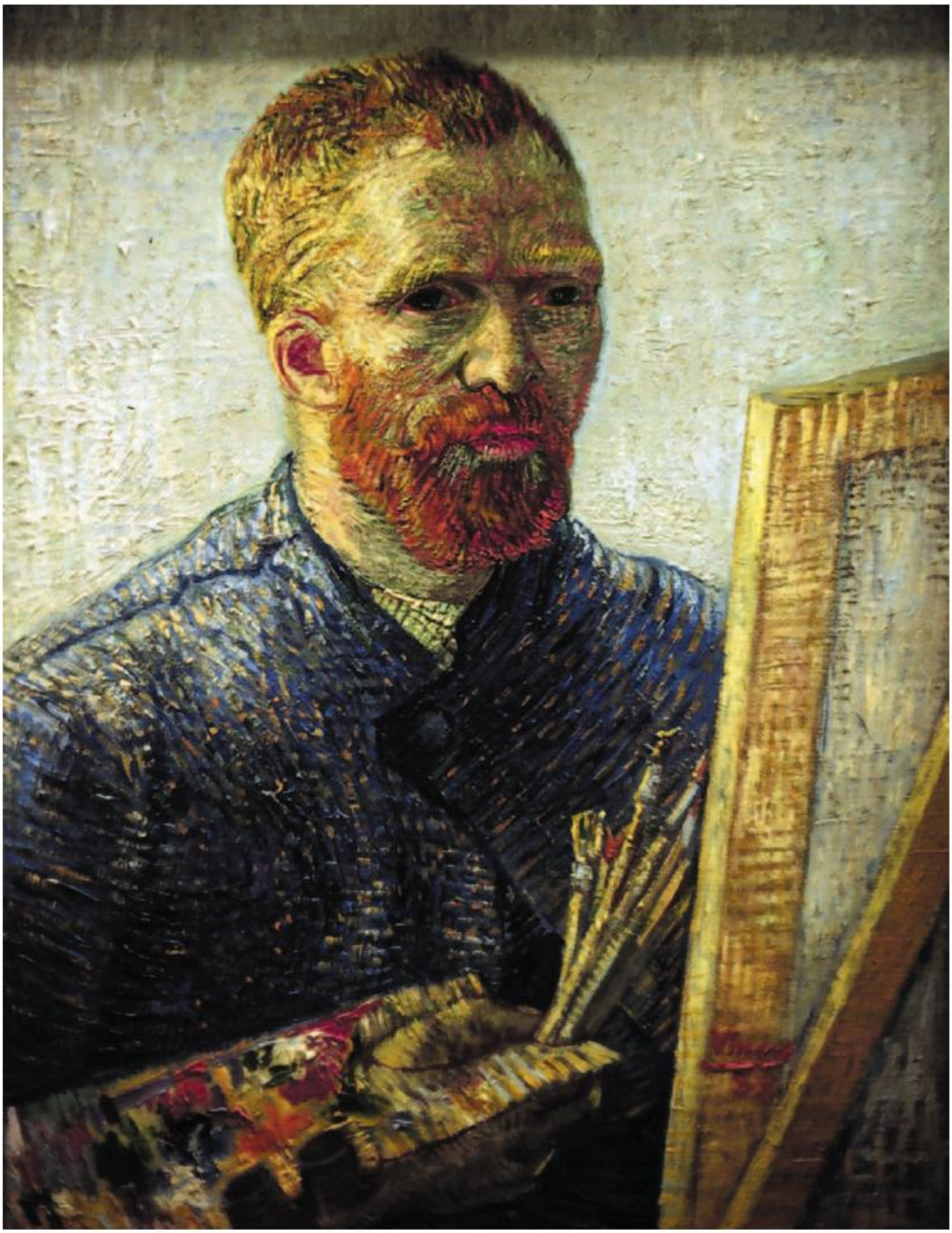


Portrait of a Woman with Carnations, Paris 1888

This is one of Van Gogh's most extraordinary portraits, because it almost looks like a regression to an amateur style. However, the one big difference is the astounding range of colour, which previously had not been seen so clearly in his Paris work. It is almost as if this is a composition of primary colours, with the drawing merely a peg on which to hang them. It is likely that it is at this point Van Gogh threw away the Impressionists' system of colour analysis in order to paint with strong colours, in the raw.

The exotic costume with its shouting pinks and reds, and the way Van Gogh has outlined some of the features in pure, strong colour gives a brilliant poster-like look to the figure. It is as if one of his beloved Japanese prints has been saturated with the brightest colours on the chart. Even the background has the effect of pushing the colour forward, and the brilliant yellow is offset by the multi-coloured striped border. The blue chair seems specially chosen to jump against the yellows and reds of the background and the figure. This is an amazing example of colour used at its strongest and most hectic, and it has produced a very potent painting in what is simply a rather cheerful way.

The model used for this portrait was probably Agostina Segatori, from Naples, who ran the Café du Tambourin in Paris, which Van Gogh and his friends frequented. Certainly the features are similar to the portrait he did of her sitting in the café. Apparently she also sat as a model for the famous French artist Corot, who in many ways anticipated the Impressionists' methods. Perhaps Van Gogh was aware of this and brings the movement full circle, by painting her in a way that had gone beyond Impressionism.



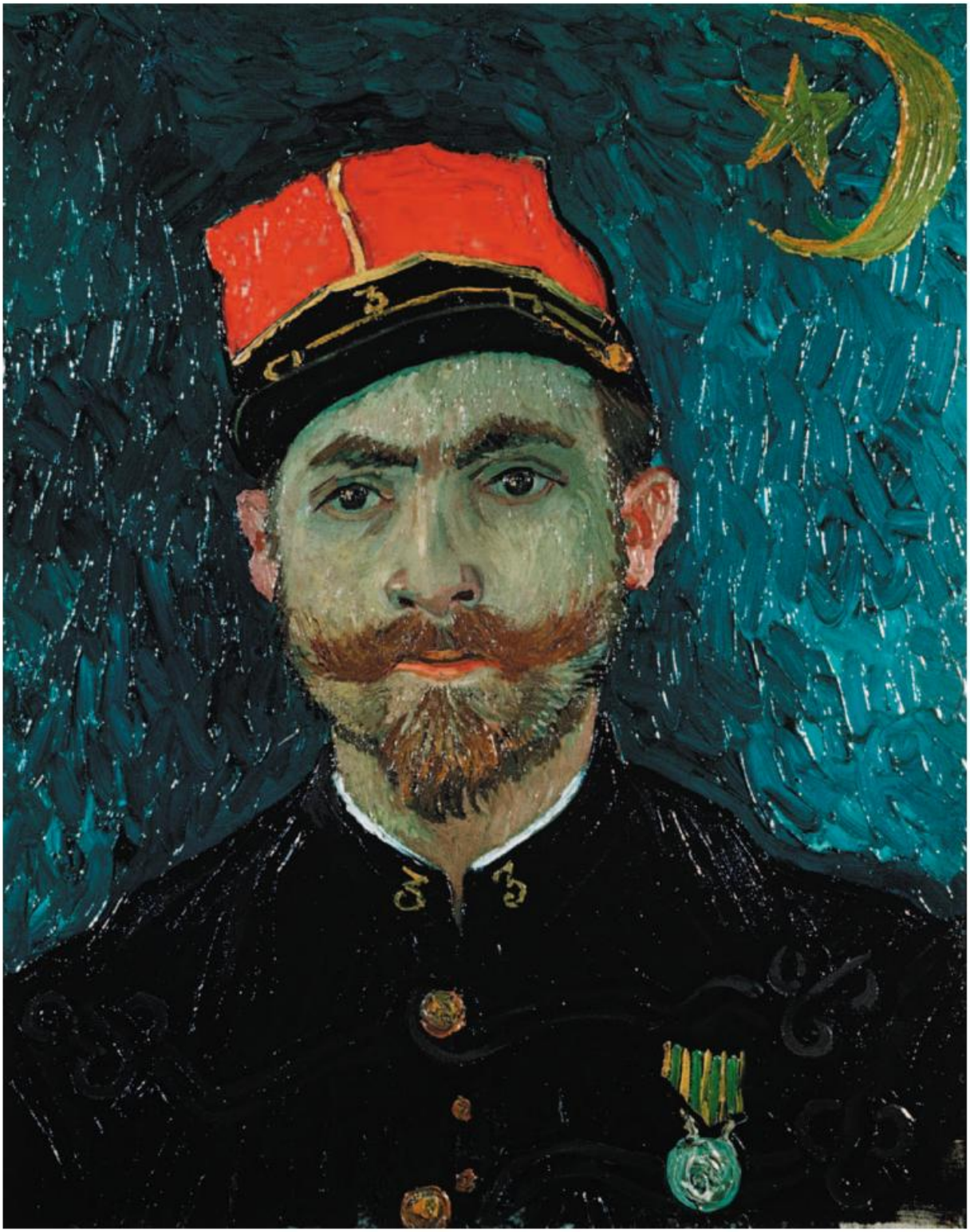
Self-Portrait in Front of an Easel, Paris 1888

While in Paris Van Gogh produced several self-portraits when he was trying to think of how to earn a living as a painter. He thought that if he could display some good self-portraits, it might help generate some work. Unfortunately he managed to quarrel with many of his friends and acquaintances, which affected his financial situation. Instead he should have taken as much advantage as possible of the close connections that Paris could have made for him. He was well thought of by the younger artists of the time but that did not help increase his income.

This self-portrait is one of Van Gogh's last efforts before he moved to Arles. He described it to his sister as a '...pink-grey countenance with green eyes, ashen hair, lines in the forehead and around the mouth, stiff, wooden, an extremely red beard, quite desperate and sad.' The mask of the face registers nothing, only the staring eyes suggest that the face is inhabited by a person. The paint is handled in a fairly impressionistic way, with the texture of the painted marks helping to show the contours of the face. This portrait is interesting in so far as it depicts Van Gogh as an artist, with easel, palette and a clutch of brushes. It is almost as though through this painting he is trying to establish his function as a professional artist.

Van Gogh's self-portraits are particularly soul-baring, giving us a clear indication of his ideas about himself: 'Painted portraits have a life of their own, something that comes from the roots of the painter's soul.'





Lieutenant Milliet, Arles 1888

Second Lieutenant Milliet became a good friend of Van Gogh while he was in Arles. Van Gogh wrote about him in letters on his luck in love affairs, '...Milliet is lucky, he has as many Arlésiennes as he wants; but then he cannot paint them, and if he were a painter he would not get them. I must bide my time without rushing things.' Van Gogh's point – a rather pathetic conclusion – was that you cannot give your heart to painting and to a girl: it was one or the other.

Van Gogh has certainly captured the dash and élan of the French military spirit in the painting of this handsome young officer. His impressive whiskers and small goatee, still in the style of Louis Napoleon III, his gleaming campaign medal and the rakish red-topped kepi and black patrol jacket have such strong identity that it would be easy to miss the rather sensitive look on the young man's face. Everything in this painting is bold, simple and ardent, including the technique of thick, well-modulated brush-strokes.

The background of blue-green with the regimental symbol of the Zouave Regiment, the crescent and star, make this a strong contender for a proper military portrait. However, despite having painted several soldiers Van Gogh was still unable to sell or obtain commissions for portraits of this type.

Milliet said of Van Gogh, '...a strange fellow, impulsive like someone who has lived a long time in the sun of the desert...a charming companion when he knew what he wanted, which did not happen every day. We would frequently take beautiful walks through the countryside around Arles and out there both of us made a great many sketches. Sometimes he put his easel up and began to smear away with paints. And that, well, that was no good. This fellow who had great taste and talent for drawing became abnormal as soon as he touched a brush...he painted too broadly, paid no attention to details, did not draw first...he replaced drawing by colours.'

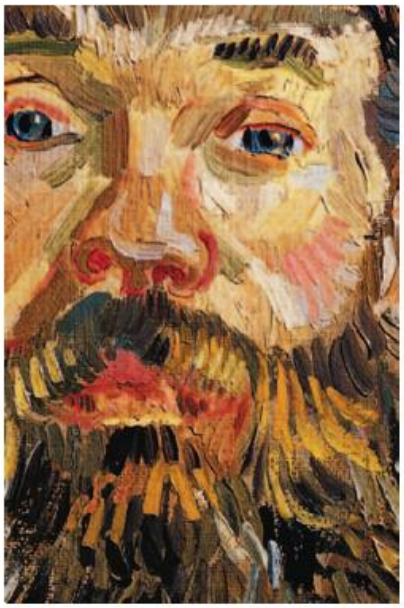


La Mousmé Sitting in a Cane Chair, Half-Figure, Arles 1888

When Van Gogh moved to Arles, he was immediately enchanted by the whole atmosphere of the Midi region of France. He was convinced that here was the place where 'the painter of the future will be a colourist such as has never existed'. Describing one of his portraits he said, 'I imagine the man...surrounded by the whole Midi. Hence the orange colours flashing like lightning...'. The volume of his work became profuse, and he realized that other painters thought he painted too fast. Van Gogh did not see speed as a problem: 'Quick work doesn't mean less serious work, it depends on one's self-confidence and experience. Is it not emotion, the sincerity of one's feelings for nature, that drives us?...the emotions are so strong that one works without knowing one works, when sometimes the strokes come with a continuity and a coherence like words in a speech or a letter...In the south, one's senses get keener...one's brain clearer.'

This painting was produced in the summer of Van Gogh's first year in Arles, and the girl is one of the Arlésiennes who sat for him. In a letter to his brother Theo, Van Gogh wrote, 'A mousmé is a Japanese girl – Provençal in this case – twelve to fourteen years old.' He has chosen a nice simple pose; the girl's right hand rests on the arm of the chair and the left holds a white flower in her lap. The skirt is painted as an almost flat blue shape, studded with orange-vermilion spots; her jacket is a striped blue and vermilion fitted garment with round red buttons and a hint of white collar at the top; and her hair is tied back with a red ribbon, all set against a light blue-green background. The handling of the face is unusual, more delicate, as though Van Gogh was trying not to make his brushstrokes too strong for the shape of her face. The portrait looks highly simplified and systematic, as though there was no time for second thoughts. Possibly the model wouldn't pose for long and so Van Gogh had to finish this work in one sitting.


POSTES



Joseph Roulin Sitting in a Cane Chair, Three-quarter Length, Arles 1888

Joseph Roulin was the local postman, and he and all his family were friendly with Van Gogh and sat for him. The family lived close to the Yellow House and Van Gogh decided that he would paint every member of the family. He wrote of making portraits '...of an entire family, that of the postman, of whom I have earlier done a head: husband, wife, baby, and the little boy and the sixteen year old son, all types and truly French, although they look like Russians.'

'Today again from seven o'clock in the morning till six in the evening I worked without stirring except to take some food a step or two away...I have no thought of fatigue, I shall do another picture this very night, and I shall bring it off', wrote Van Gogh. At this rate of work it is not surprising that he could produce so many pictures in so short a time, nor indeed that he got ill.

When Van Gogh was allowed out of hospital after his crisis with Gauguin he wrote: 'I came out of the hospital with kind old Roulin, who had come to get me...Roulin, though he is not quite old enough to be like a father to me, nevertheless has a silent gravity and a tenderness for me such as an old soldier might have for a young one ...a man who is neither embittered, nor sad, nor perfect nor happy, nor always irreproachably just. But a good soul and so wise and so full of feeling and so trustful.'

Joseph Roulin posed for Van Gogh six times. At the time Van Gogh painted him, opposite, he was the proud father of a newborn daughter, and some of his cheerful pride shows in the painting.

Detail Although the brushmarks of loaded colour on the face of Joseph Roulin's portrait are vigorous and clearly to be seen, they are placed so carefully that the surface of the man's face is clearly defined and there is no impression that the marks are too strong for the face. The texture gives a lively effect to the quite precisely graded colours and tones – Van Gogh has meticulous artistic control, even if his brush strokes appear to lack it.



The Old Peasant Patience Escalier, Arles 1888

This remarkable portrait of an old peasant is a very positive statement of the colour combinations that Van Gogh was now interested in. The bright yellow, thickly-painted straw hat and the sharply lined bright-blue smock contrast splendidly with the bright orange background; the colour of the south as far as Van Gogh was concerned. The vermilion splashes on the undershirt and scarf act like a searchlight to draw attention to the remarkable weather-beaten old face of Patience Escalier, with reflections lighting his nose and cheek bones under the deep-ochre of his hat brim. The gnarled hands clasped below his grey stubbly beard show the hardship of his working life and resemble roots or the twisted branches of a tree.

In this painstaking portrait Van Gogh has encapsulated the spirit of the southern working population. Despite the slight traces of anxiety in the face it is generally peaceful, with an air of wisdom. This painting gives a very clear statement of the direction that Van Gogh's work was taking, away from the Impressionist background that he had been attracted to in Paris. No-one had painted quite like this before.







Camille Roulin, Arles 1888

Van Gogh's series of portraits of the Roulin family included this painting of Joseph Roulin's youngest son, Camille, an eleven-year-old, whom he paints wearing a large floppy beret-style hat. The boy was probably pleased to sit as the rest of his family were being painted as well, and no doubt he would not have wanted to be left out. Even given Van Gogh's rate of painting, it is quite a feat to get the youngster to keep still long enough to get such a strong portrait.

The young inquisitive face, with bright blue eyes and a rather large nose, appears to be staring at something, as if in a dream – possibly because he had been sitting for so long or perhaps he was watching Van Gogh paint. The dashing brushwork of the hat and jacket are mirrored in slightly finer form on the features of the face, producing an oddly soft-looking surface, despite the obvious brushstrokes.

Armand Roulin, Arles 1888

The portrait of Joseph Roulin's eldest son, Armand, gives a very nice picture of a young countryman endeavouring to show panache, with his dark, jaunty hat, yellow jacket and clean linen. His face gives away his youth, with its slightly uncertain look in the eyes and the wispy moustache barely disguising his soft mouth and rounded chin. He looks as though he has got his best clothes on in order to make sure his portrait is as impressive as possible, and Van Gogh has done him great justice in showing his temporary elegance without any hint of irony. The clear blue-green background makes a beautiful foil for the yellow coat and the dark hat, and conveys a touch of the freshness and hope surrounding the young man. A sensitive and sympathetic portrait.



Augustine Roulin (La Berceuse), Arles 1888

This is the motherly wife of Joseph Roulin the postman, mother of Armand, Camille and the newborn baby girl, with whom she was also painted. Van Gogh attempted several of these paintings at the same time and had quite a struggle to finish even one of them.

Van Gogh has been careful to bring the range of colours into very close harmony, without the sudden surprises of some of his more brilliantly coloured efforts. He seems to have taken his colour cue from the background wallpaper or richly patterned curtain. The figure is heavily outlined, which helps to lift it out of the strongly patterned background, and the greens, greys, browns and red ochres of the figure are kept closely harmonized by keeping the tones close to each other. Van Gogh has given the sitter's head an almost spotlit upper half, which shows up her red hair and gives a warm glow to the face – that looks surprisingly young in contrast to her workworn hands. She sits comfortably and patiently, waiting for the painting to be finished: one feels that her mind is not far from her family and their needs. The way Van Gogh has finely painted the surface of the face shows that he was keen to work the facets, dimensions and structure of the head in as smooth a way as possible. The face is a beautiful example of a much-loved matriarch: gentle, warm and unmarked by the stress of time.

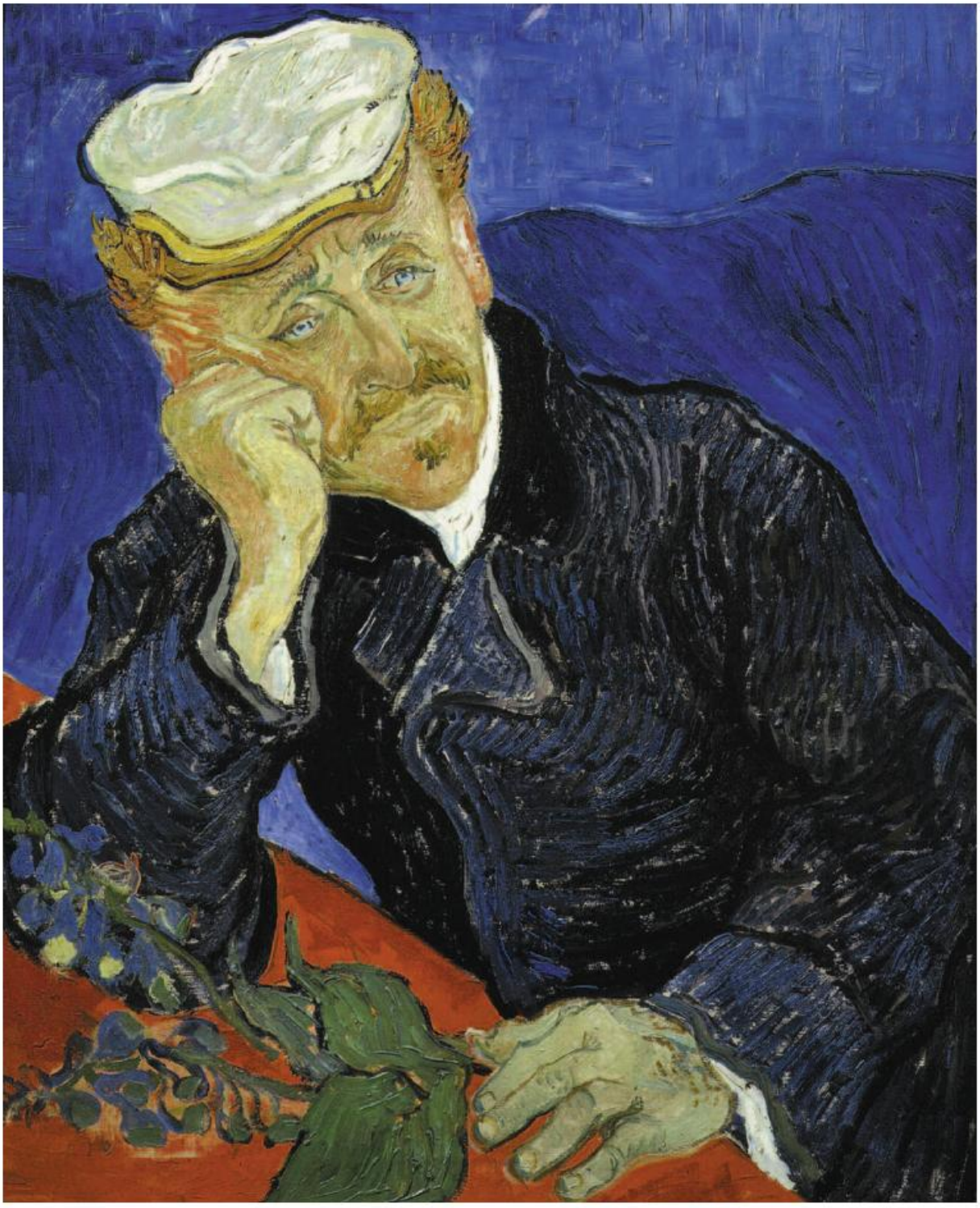


Père Tanguy, Paris 1887

Père Tanguy was the avuncular Paris art supplier and dealer who was a champion of unrecognized artists, often allowing them supplies in return for a painting. Most of his artist customers owed him money – a fact to which his wife was not always reconciled. He was widely liked and recognized by most of the young artists, and built an excellent collection of pictures in lieu of payment.

In this painting the amiable dealer is set against a background of Japanese prints, or at least Van Gogh's versions of them. The handling of the colour is quite light and the snub features of Père Tanguy are painted with an almost childlike reduction of shapes, but without losing the solid dimensional quality of the round head and the strong, clasped hands. It is an extremely busy painting with the flickering shapes and colours in the background jumping against the more solid shape of the figure, which is also somewhat broken up by light paintstrokes over dark colours. The figure looks rather doll-like, and the breadth of the nose and the wide space between the eyes gives an almost cartoon effect. It is interesting to note the bright vermilion outline around the seated figure, which helps to separate it from the background. An unusual device, but effective.





Dr Gachet Sitting at a Table, Auvers-sur-Oise 1890

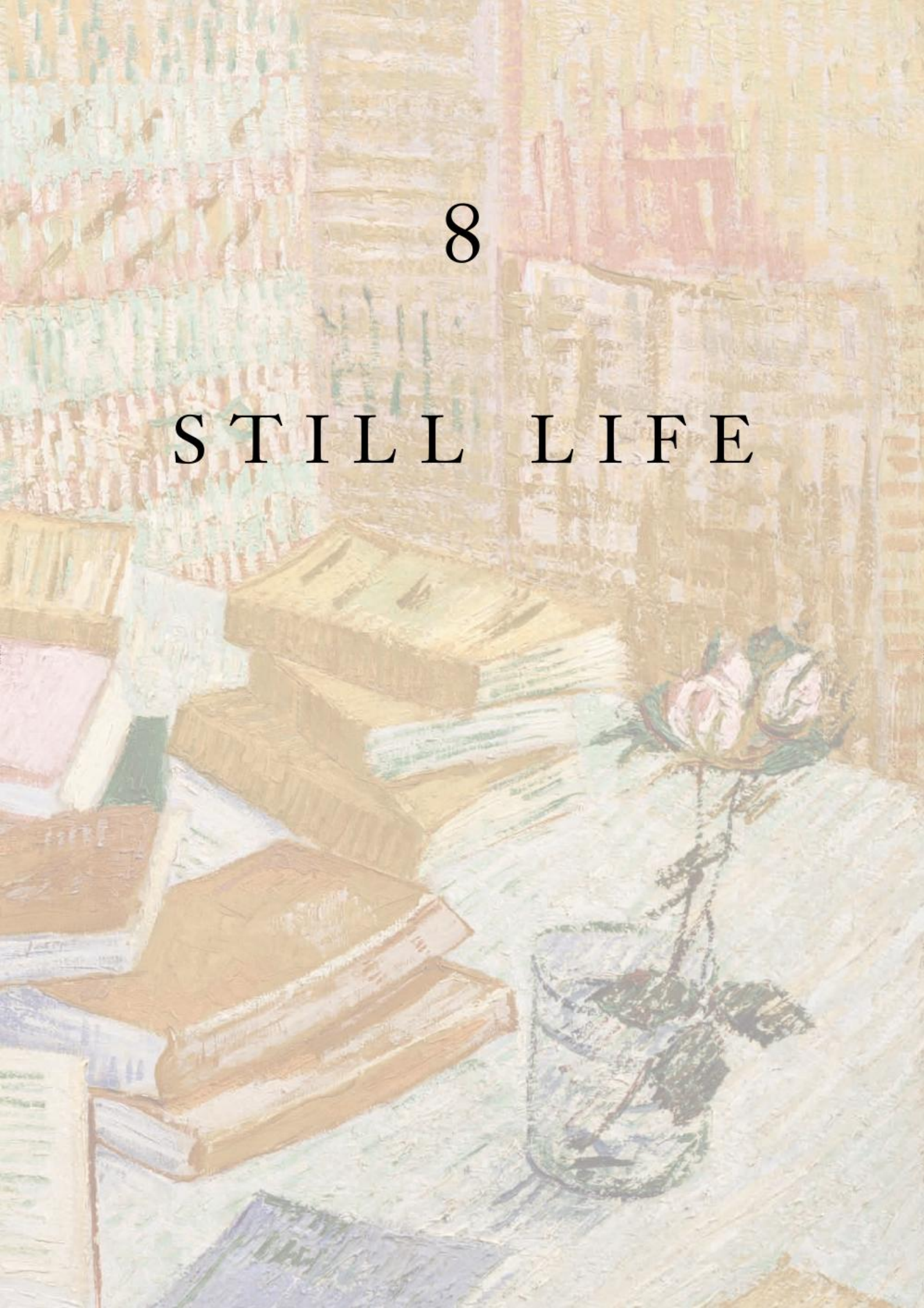
Dr Paul Gachet was a physician and amateur painter, a friend of Monticelli and a collector of works by Cézanne, Pissarro and Renoir. Pissarro suggested to Theo, Van Gogh's brother, that the doctor keep an eye on Van Gogh while he lived near Paris so that Theo could visit him more easily. The doctor was obliging and encouraged Van Gogh in his work. Van Gogh felt he had found a true friend in Gachet. 'I have seen Dr Gachet, who gives me an impression of being rather eccentric, but his experience as a doctor must keep him balanced enough to combat the nervous trouble from which he certainly seems to me to be suffering at least as seriously as I...his house is full of black antiques, black, black, black...except for the Impressionist paintings mentioned. The impression I got of him was not unfavourable. When he spoke of Belgium and the days of the old painters, his grief-hardened face grew smiling again, and I think I shall go on being friends with him and that I shall do his portrait... this gentleman knows a good deal about painting, and he greatly likes mine; he encourages me very much, and two or three times a week he comes and visits me for a few hours to see what I am doing.'

Van Gogh said of this portrait, 'I painted Dr Gachet with an expression of melancholy, which would seem to look like a grimace to many who saw the canvas...with the broken-hearted expression of our time.'

Van Gogh was in fact lunching with the Gachets when he suddenly got up from the table and left. That afternoon he shot himself, and although he lived for another day and a half, he died from his wound, in the arms of his brother, with the words, '*La tristesse durera*' (there is no end to sadness).

8

STILL LIFE



Birds' nests, boots, flowers, fruits and utensils

Van Gogh is probably best known for his landscapes and portraits but it is his still life, *Sunflowers* (p.156), that really persists in the popular mind.

Painters often use still life as a recourse to expression when other means are blocked, perhaps due to bad weather or the lack of a model. Again, when the mind is struggling for focus, the ability to put down a still life can be the quickest way to resolve the problem. It is not difficult to gather a few everyday objects together and arrange them, with some consideration of lighting and background, into an agreeable composition for painting. Many artists have made it their speciality and Van Gogh would have known the great seventeenth century Dutch tradition of still-life painting from the works of such masters as Van Beyeren, Bosschaert and Snyders.

This section shows a considerable range of Van Gogh's output in terms of still life. The pieces are selected from various periods of his life and vary quite plainly in quality and expertise. The one thing they have in common, however, is sincerity and an intense interest in the materiality of the subject matter.

Van Gogh was quite adventurous in the choice of topics for his still-life compositions and although he never had much money to buy 'props', he seemed keen to try any combination of objects. Sometimes, substance and form was the main reason for the choice. He assembled a group of bird's nests in 1885: '...I am now busy painting still lifes of my bird's nests, four of which are finished; I think some people who are good observers of nature might like them because of the colours of the moss, the dry leaves and the grasses...'

Once he moved to Paris in 1886, Van Gogh's previously restrained Dutch palette was replaced by a stunning burst of colour. 'Just dash something down when you see a blank canvas staring at you...'. This was the result of some tireless devotion to flower studies, as he tested the Impressionists' ground-breaking colour theories. Apparently, a variety of flowers would be delivered daily to his brother's apartment in aid of Van Gogh's exploration of 'oppositions' and 'extremes'.


Vincent 87

A Pair of Old Shoes, Arles 1888

This rather low-key colour composition of a pair of old shoes was painted at the height of Van Gogh's powerful, colourful and expansive period of work in Arles. Although his handling of the textural quality of the paint has much in common with other works being produced at this time, the very close colour range, even the lack of colour range, is rather surprising. It is as if in the midst of his intense experience of contrasting colour effects, he has suddenly returned to the sort of work he was doing in Paris or even Nuenen. The picture is too light in tone for the very earliest period of his painting, but he appears to have made a conscious attempt to reduce the handling of colour, perhaps for variety and to look again at tonal values.

This work is in complete contrast to two paintings he had done earlier in the same month, *The Night Café* (p.174) and *The Old Peasant, Patience Escalier* (p.140), both of which have strongly contrasting colours which flare off the canvas. Here everything is muted and subtle in colour range, although the darker shadow on the right of the shoes looks somewhat arbitrary in method. Perhaps they were Van Gogh's own shoes, and symbolize him casting off a previous artistic embodiment.



Fritillaries in a Copper Vase, Paris 1887

Some of the first signs of Van Gogh's attempt to lighten and brighten his palette are found in his paintings of flowers in vases. He was very impressed by the painter Adolph Monticelli, who painted many colourful vases of flowers using thick, impasto paint and strong, even clashing colour combinations. Monticelli's critics were very rude about his loose technique of painting, but Van Gogh disagreed. He admired his work and said of one of his pieces that Theo Van Gogh bought, 'in terms of colour it is something of the first order'.

In this painting of orange-yellow fritillaries in a copper vase, on the corner of a table against a wall of blue, Van Gogh has attempted a very strong colour contrast, combining the complementary colours of orange and blue with only a little green and yellow to soften the blue. He did not take these contrasts as far as he did in his paintings in Arles, and the blue background is reduced with yellowish-white dots to stop it being too overwhelming. The strength of the bright copper vase gives a nice balance to the strong orange fritillaries, which are also slightly reduced in contrast by the darker green leaves next to them and the dark grey stems. Although this is a considerable lightening of Van Gogh's palette from his Nuenen days, and a very powerful contrast in theory, the careful handling of the tonal values stops the jump in contrast that might have occurred.

This is an interesting consideration of more traditional painting tonalities that holds his colour intensity in check.



Vase with Sunflowers, Arles 1889

Gauguin considered that Van Gogh's sunflower paintings, of which there are several, were highly successful and should become his trade mark. Van Gogh wanted the Yellow House at Arles to be decorated in 'a symphony of blue and yellow' to greet Gauguin when he came to live with him. He intended that the sunflower paintings should all be in Gauguin's room to greet him, framed in red painted wood. Van Gogh said of this period, 'I am painting with the enthusiasm of a resident of Marseilles eating bouillabaisse [a Provençal fish dish] which shall not surprise you, when it involves painting large sunflowers.'

These powerful saffron and lemon, gold and orange compositions of large blooms in simple earthenware pots are a long way from the painting of dried sunflower heads that Van Gogh had painted in Paris. It is as if the whole of Provence's heat and light were captured and displayed in these intensely colourful vases of flowers. The conventional concept of a still life of vases of flowers can appear so nicely decorative and somewhat lifeless that these painted punches of colour seem hardly of the same genre. Here the vigour and power of the growth and the condensed sunlight in the blooms cannot be seen as just an elegant adjunct to a drawing-room wall: they almost grab the viewer by the throat. Gauguin was very perceptive to see that they were a statement that said so much about Van Gogh and his intensity.



Basket with Lemons, Arles 1888

About the time that Van Gogh painted this picture he was just settling into the life of a painter in the Midi region of France. He had begun working outside and was painting landscapes but had not yet started on his portraits of the local inhabitants. This painting, to some extent, harks back to his Parisian ways of painting, although it has somehow evolved into a simpler, less technical method. The paint is thick and the drawing is clearly defined, and there is a brightness about the colour that may not have been evident in a more northern light. The composition is conventional, with the upright bottle dark against the pale background and the lemons scattered in and around the straw basket. The pale yellow of the table top makes the greener lemons look much darker, although probably at this time of year, in May, the skin would indeed have been greener than later in the summer.

This work acts as a transition between Van Gogh's *Still Life with a Basket of Potatoes* and the flower paintings of later in the year, having some of the latter's power and some of the more physical solidity of the earlier piece. But even so, the whole painting still holds the light of the southern sun and gives a warm airy effect.




DE LA SANTE
F. V. RASPAIL

Plate with Onions, Arles 1889

Painted in Arles, this relatively conventional still life has some similarity to the sort of still life Cézanne was also working on at this period. Van Gogh had probably met Cézanne in Paris and in fact, of course, was not living all that far away from Cézanne's home in Provence. It is in the classic mode of nineteenth-century French still-life genre, and apart from the rather high viewpoint it is almost entirely 'traditional'. The greatest difference from more typical still lifes of this period, which tells us that it is a Van Gogh, is the way that the yellow tablecloth shines out from the scene, flooding the picture with southern sun.

Van Gogh often placed himself firmly in the line of French painters who did not mind to, or even strove to, follow the main line of artistic development. However, he also took up with great energy the role of revolutionary artist and created a new canon for future artists.

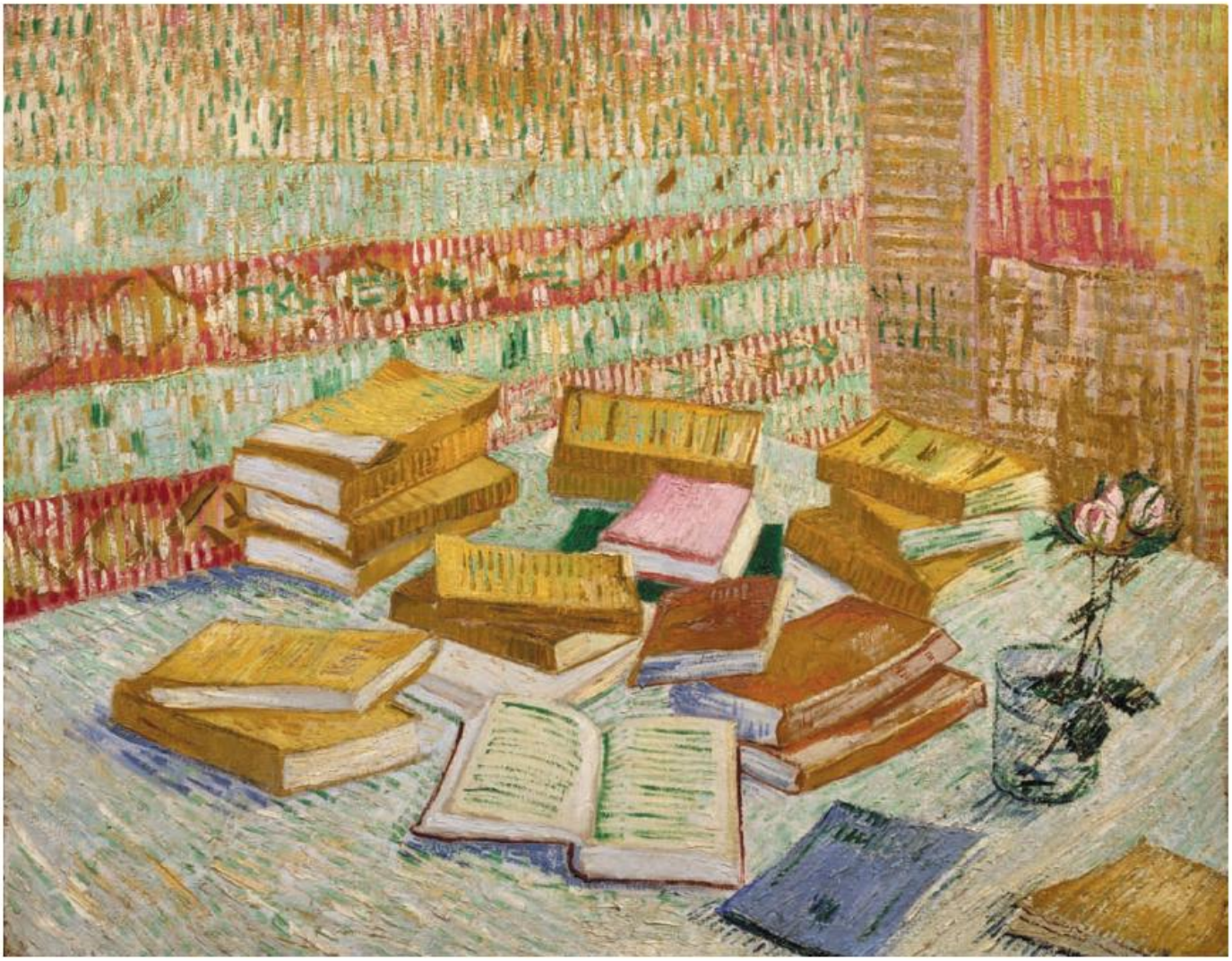




Pots, Bottles and Flasks, Paris 1886

This is very similar to a classic still life from the era of the great Spanish still-life painters, such as Luiz Melendez. It has the general overall colour scheme of Melendez and the massed objects push out from the picture plane, the dark background making the objects loom forward. It is a careful study, taking note of the materiality of the objects and placing them so that the repetition of their shapes produces a harmonious rhythm across the picture. Again one feels that Van Gogh was trying out everything he came into contact with in the artistic world. He was already painting with ease the effects of three-dimensional shapes in space and understood how to make tone work effectively for his compositions. But of the explosion of light that was to take place in Provence there is no hint. Here he is still in the shadows, so to speak, and still reliant on many other artists to help him along his path.





The Yellow Books, Paris 1881

Van Gogh was a cultured man and read a great deal: Balzac, Hugo, the Goncourts, Shakespeare, Dickens, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Michelet, Bunyan, Zola and other modern authors. He was also quite well read in the Bible, as one would expect of the son of a clergyman, particularly the New Testament, and he had studied some Latin and Greek, which he found difficult. He was also cognisant of most modern painters, both French and English, and the great masters. It is not surprising, therefore, that he painted a collection of books. They are mostly yellow-covered books, which means that they were probably modern French novels rather than works of reference. This was during the development of naturalistic symbolist/realist writing and Van Gogh seems to have been quite a keen reader of these sorts of novels.

The paint has gone on quite thickly, but Van Gogh manages to suggest the materiality and the rough-edged pages of the books (cheap books in Van Gogh's day were typically published with uncut pages and had to be sliced apart – carefully or not – by the reader themselves). Perhaps it is significant that even before his trip to Arles he was already interested in yellow as a potent colour.


Vincent

Vase with Cornflowers and Poppies, Paris 1887

This is an interesting variation on Van Gogh's usual tendency towards yellowish flowers; brilliant red, white and blue flowers, in a pale blue vase on a warm-coloured tablecloth, against a deep blue wall. Was this an attempt to show his appreciation of French culture with a patriotic bouquet, possibly finished for Bastille Day of July 1887? Its brightness shows how his progress in changing his colour values had progressed: the intensity of colour seems to increase in leaps and bounds until his culminating efforts in Arles. It is noticeable that although he retains a lighter and brighter palette after returning to the north again from Arles, his colours definitely begin to show a cooler, more controlled range of tones. Perhaps he curbed his exuberance under the influence of 'polite' society once again, and in Paris at this time he produced several brilliant paintings of colourful flowers. Van Gogh was influenced by Monticelli, who was well known for his highly-coloured flower paintings, and again, this may have been a form of homage to Monticelli. He was also influenced by Henri Fantin-Latour, a masterly painter of flower pieces whom Van Gogh called 'one of the most independent spirits of our time'.





Pears, Arles 1888

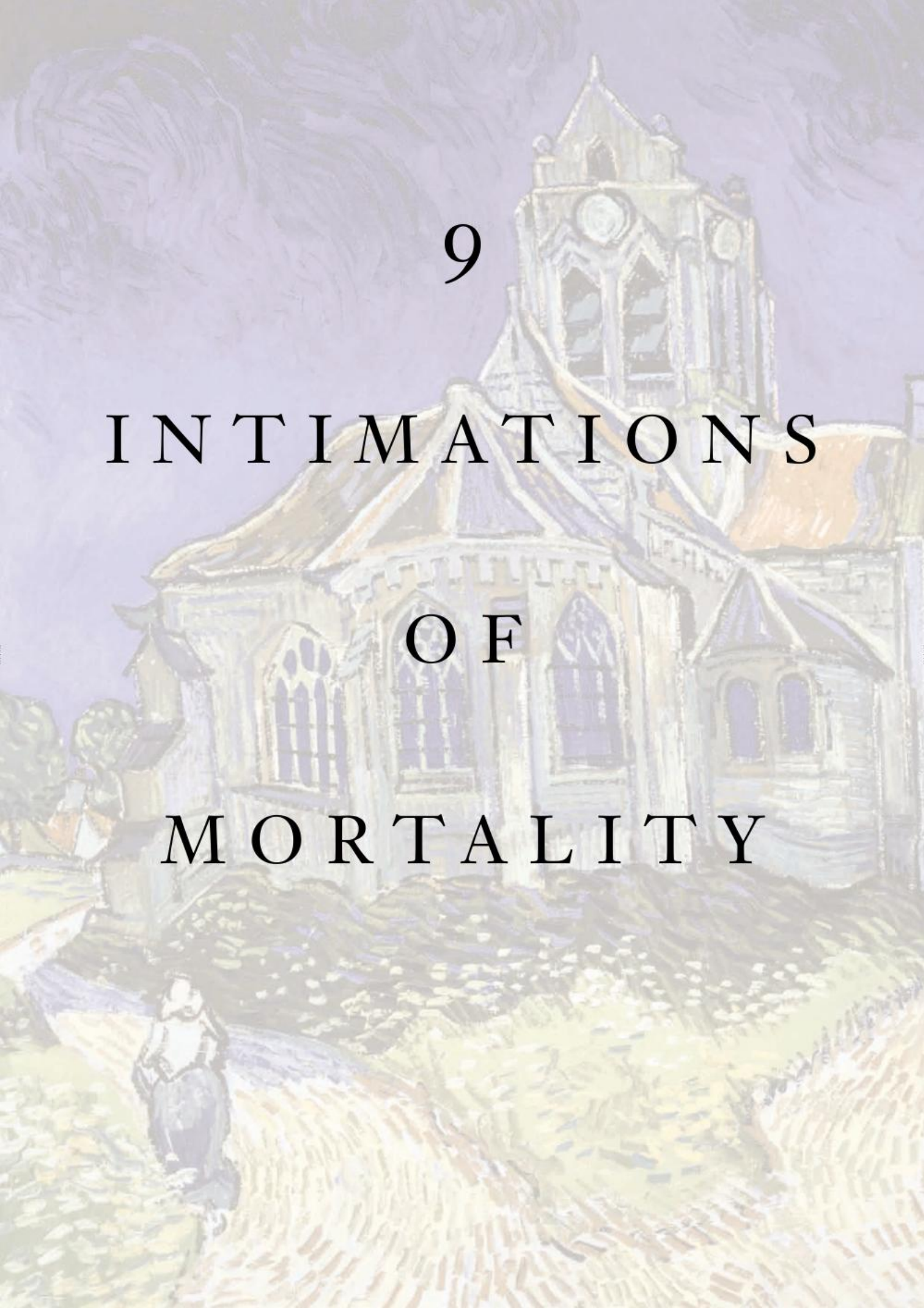
This juicy looking still life of a pile of pears on a cloth shows the brilliance and solidity of Van Gogh's developing techniques of painting. The hard work in Holland and Paris finally bore fruit when the sunlight of Arles seemed to awaken his powerful talent.

The way he has shown how the light reflects across the rounded surfaces of the fruit, all with a rich, dark, tonal cast shadow on the flowered cloth, tell of the dimensions and ripeness of the pears. Such heaped abundance seems to have been one of Van Gogh's delights when arranging a still-life composition.

Birds' Nests, Nuenen 1885

This work was painted when Van Gogh was at Nuenen, most likely in the autumn of 1885. He had already proved his ability by painting the large master-work, *The Potato Eaters* (p.24). His work was developing rapidly, although still in the traditional Dutch style, with dark backgrounds and a severely limited colour palette. This beautifully observed version (he painted and drew several) shows Van Gogh's understanding of light and his ability to use it to create the texture of the twigs, giving a convincing, tactile quality to the painting.

When Van Gogh moved to Paris in the spring of the following year his palette began to brighten up, ultimately resulting in the explosion of colour for which he is now more famous. Towards the end of his life he referred to this period: 'I sometimes regret that I did not simply stick to the Dutch palette with its grey tones.' Fortunately he only regretted it 'sometimes' as the world of modern art would have lacked a strong influence without Van Gogh's example of powerful colour contrasts.



9

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

Symbolism, asylums and other enclosed spaces

During his last years Van Gogh seemed to hint strongly at the probable shortness of his life. His letters describe constant battles with his illness and all the disturbing symptoms that accompanied it: depression, anxiety, dizziness, strange voices, difficulty in swallowing and agoraphobia. The sheer emotional and physical exhaustion that he suffered must have made the idea of oblivion attractive by comparison: 'Often I said to myself that I preferred but there be nothing further, that this be the end.'

His use of certain motifs in his paintings, most noticeably the cast-off boots and the artist's empty chair, give a sense of his being disconnected, even from his most familiar possessions. Van Gogh was a confirmed loner in his last years. People recalled him trudging the country roads with his painting equipment, but he would walk past without acknowledging them. Yet he complained to Theo of loneliness and having to sleep alone in the Yellow House at Arles. However, the self-portraits with a bandaged ear only go to prove that the company of another artist was not the complete answer.

During his year at St-Rémy, Van Gogh seemed to derive consolation from the protection of the asylum: '...I am not ready to leave here now or in the near future...it is only recently that my loathing of life has been drastically changed.'

One picture from the St-Rémy period is the *Wheatfield Behind the Hospital with a Reaper*. Van Gogh described the solitary figure as 'the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping...But there's nothing sad in this death...with a sun flooding everything with a light of gold.'

Van Gogh had long since entered a vicious cycle: he was unable to enjoy his periods of good health because he lived in fear of his next attack: '...even when my health has returned, I am still afraid.'

In the early summer of 1890, Van Gogh had a short time to live. It was, 'vast fields of wheat under troubled skies' that yielded his most significant intimations of mortality: *Wheatfield with Crows* (p.190) was not his final work but it was his very own threshold of eternity.

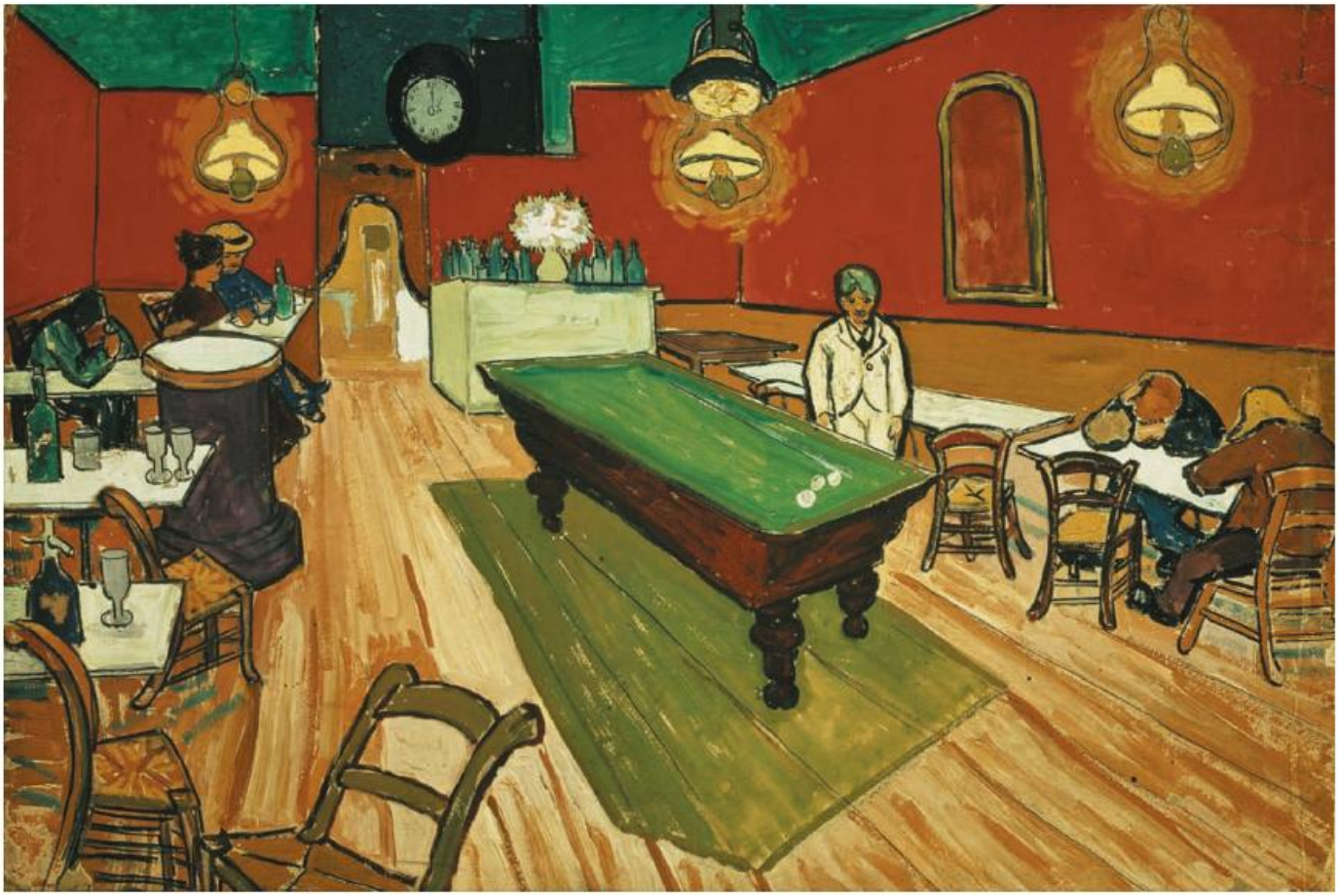


Sower with a Setting Sun, Arles 1888

The theme of the sower was significant for Van Gogh, and probably began when he copied Millet's *The Sower* in 1880. Millet was his early artistic hero and at one time Van Gogh said that a picture by Millet said more than most clergymen's sermons. He was most impressed by his work and considered him the greatest modern artist, even greater than Manet, whom he thought highly of for his attempts to produce new art.

This is one of the later variations that Van Gogh produced while at Arles and the whole scene has a dramatic tension about it. The dark tones divide the canvas into bands, while the lowering sun's rays suggest a halo near the sower's dark bowed head making the darker colours of the background look all the more ghostly. The view of the sower, which might be an optimistic one, looks baleful and rather sinister in this composition. Although Van Gogh describes the sower and wheatfields as symbols of infinity and certainty, the cycle of the country work does not usually seem so hopeful; in this particular picture it is more akin to the sinister reaper symbol, which Van Gogh explained was symbolically opposite to the sower. In this picture which hints at Van Gogh's disappointment and exhaustion with the world, that is rather difficult to believe.





The Night Café, Arles 1888

'In my picture of *The Night Cafe*, I have tried to express the idea that the cafe is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness in a low public house, by soft Louis XV green and malachite, contrasting with yellow-green and harsh blue-greens, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace of pale sulphur.'

Van Gogh also said at this period: 'Is the whole of life visible to us, or isn't it rather that this side of death we see only one hemisphere? ...I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.'

What a picture! What intensity in the hot yellow light and the figures slumped around tables, except for the menacing patron who stands near the billiard table. The hot red walls and the bright light seen through the doorway make the café look like a strong contender for a den of iniquity, yet a curiously flat one, where all energy – evil or otherwise – is leached from the customers to keep the colours and lights glowing hotly.

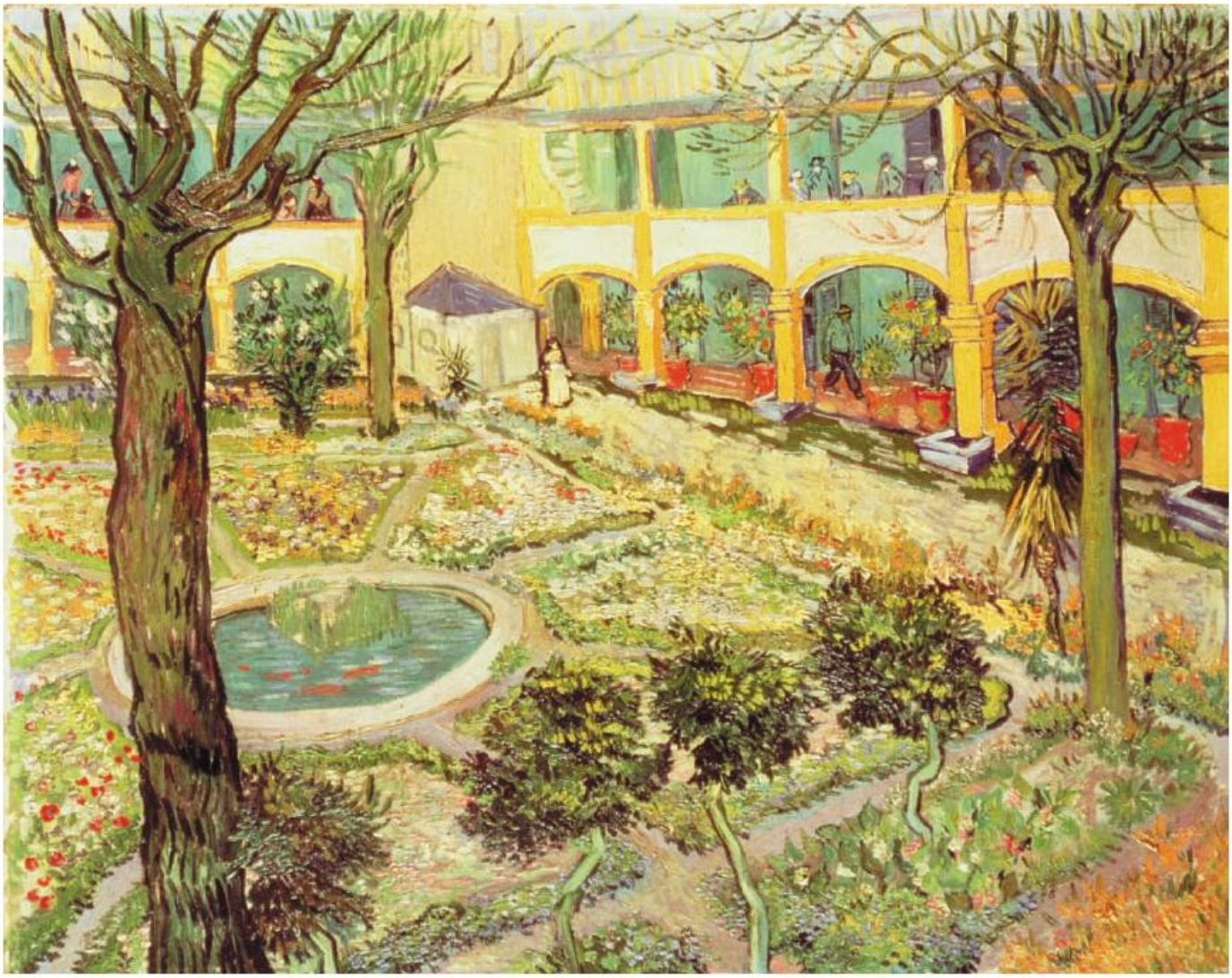
Van Gogh said to Gauguin: 'I always think my artistic conceptions extremely ordinary when compared to yours. I have always had the coarse lusts of a beast. I forget everything in favour of the external beauty of things, which I cannot reproduce, for in my picture I render it as something ugly and coarse, whereas nature seems perfect to me.' Perhaps this picture is indicative of Van Gogh's cynicism about mankind; the picture has the energetic colour of his *Sunflowers* (p.156), but none of their vitality and promise.



Memory of the Garden at Etten, Arles 1888

'During my illness I saw again every room in the house at Zundert, every path, every plant in the garden, the views of the fields outside, the neighbours, the graveyard, the church, our kitchen garden at the back – down to the magpie's nest in a tall acacia in the graveyard. It's because I still have earlier recollections of those first days than any of the rest of you. There is no one left who remembers all this but Mother and me. I say no more about it, since I had better not try to go over all that passed through my head then.'

But Van Gogh did put it down in this painting. It is difficult to say with certainty who the people are, possibly one of them is his mother. The landscape is strangely patterned; clothes and even the positions of the figures are depicted in a way that is difficult to understand. His childhood memories must have been like so many of our early recollections; oddly illumined snapshots of angles of places and people that we cannot quite envisage. This may not be a rational piece of recollection on Van Gogh's part, but it is an intense visual memory of fragments of incidents melded together. It has, generally, the feeling of a sad picture as the faces of the two close-up figures look sorrowful. It is certainly unlike many of his other works, and a little reminiscent of some of Gauguin's Breton compositions.



Fountain and Garden of Asylum, St-Rémy 1889

This is an extremely spacious view of the asylum gardens where Van Gogh was first treated after his break with Gauguin and the episode of the cut ear. The gardens look delightful: colourful and full of light. Although it is still winter this is an optimistic-looking picture, especially as the high viewpoint gives us such a wide vista of architecture and grounds. There is no hint of the pressure or mental disturbance that Van Gogh must have been suffering from at the time he painted this and he is still able to create a positive view of the world. A triumph of artistic genius over very difficult circumstances.

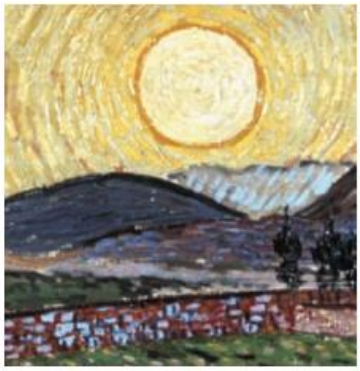
This picture shows Van Gogh's mastery of drawing outside from life in this most unforgiving medium. It must have been done in his more lucid moments in the hospital because there is no hint of any lack of confidence. The solidity and ruggedness of the tree trunks, the beautiful ellipses of the stone pond, and the perspective of the hospital buildings in the background go to make this a real masterpiece of technique.

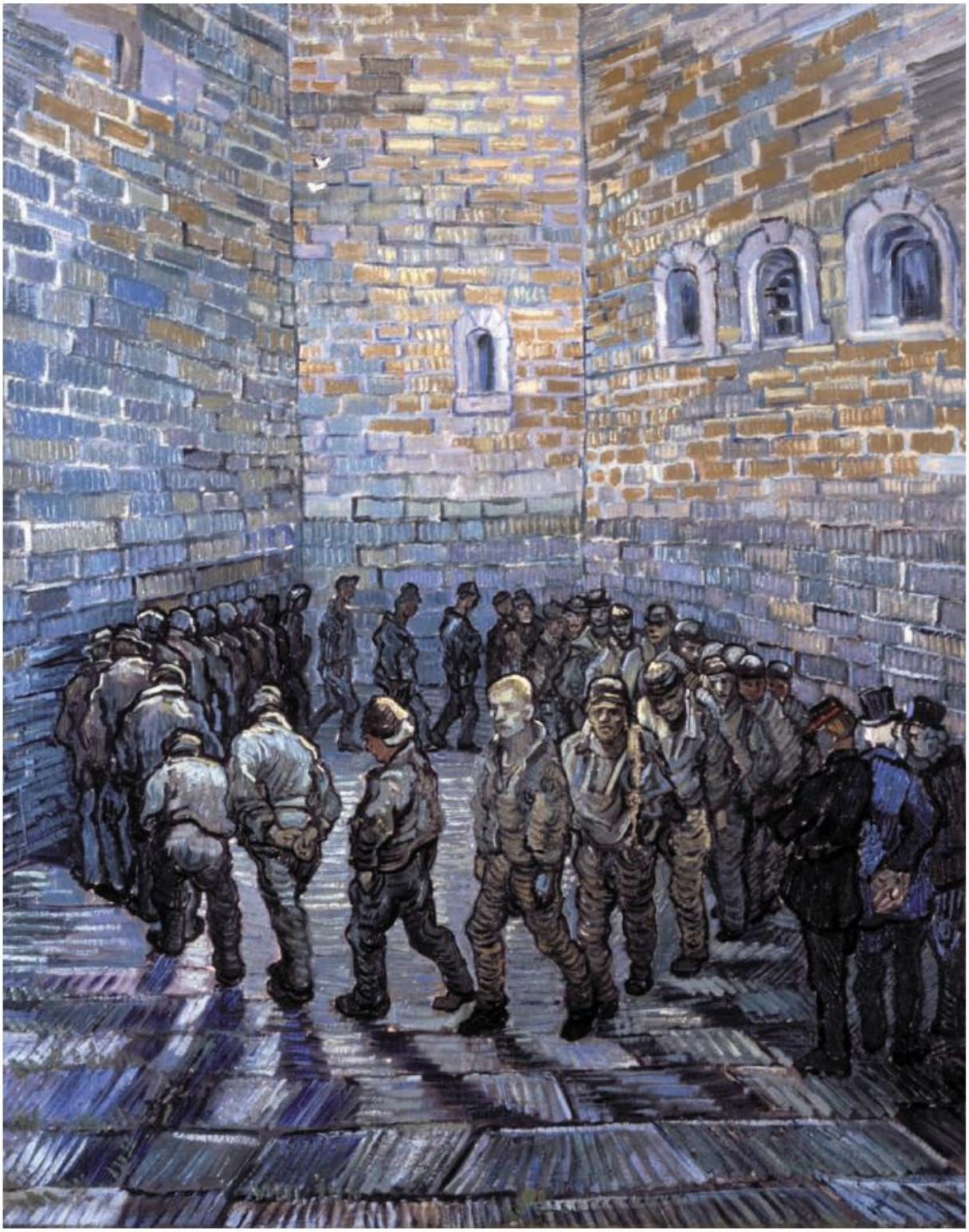
One marvels at the patience of his careful handling of tone, which not only give the effect of light and shade but also of the materiality of the different aspects of the picture. Despite his unpleasant fits and depression, he could still see beauty around him. And by this time his talent had advanced enough to allow him to give us an unforgettable picture of the scene.



Mountain Landscape Seen Across Walls with Rising Sun and Green Fields, St-Rémy 1889

Another extraordinarily vivid and hopeful-looking landscape, as seen from the windows of Van Gogh's hospital room. The cool blue-stoned walls throw into relief the vivid green, lush field, which is vigorous with springing life; the blue distant hills are quiet and orderly; and above all the vibrant golden sun bounces back the daylight which must have flooded straight into Van Gogh's face as he painted this picture. The picture can be seen as somehow symbolic: the unmown meadow of grass is springing with life but enclosed within the (asylum?) walls, while outside is a well ordered and calm landscape under a bright risen sun. An optimistic view, perhaps, of his own condition at the time, and the world he hoped to return to outside the asylum?





The Exercise Yard, St-Rémy 1889

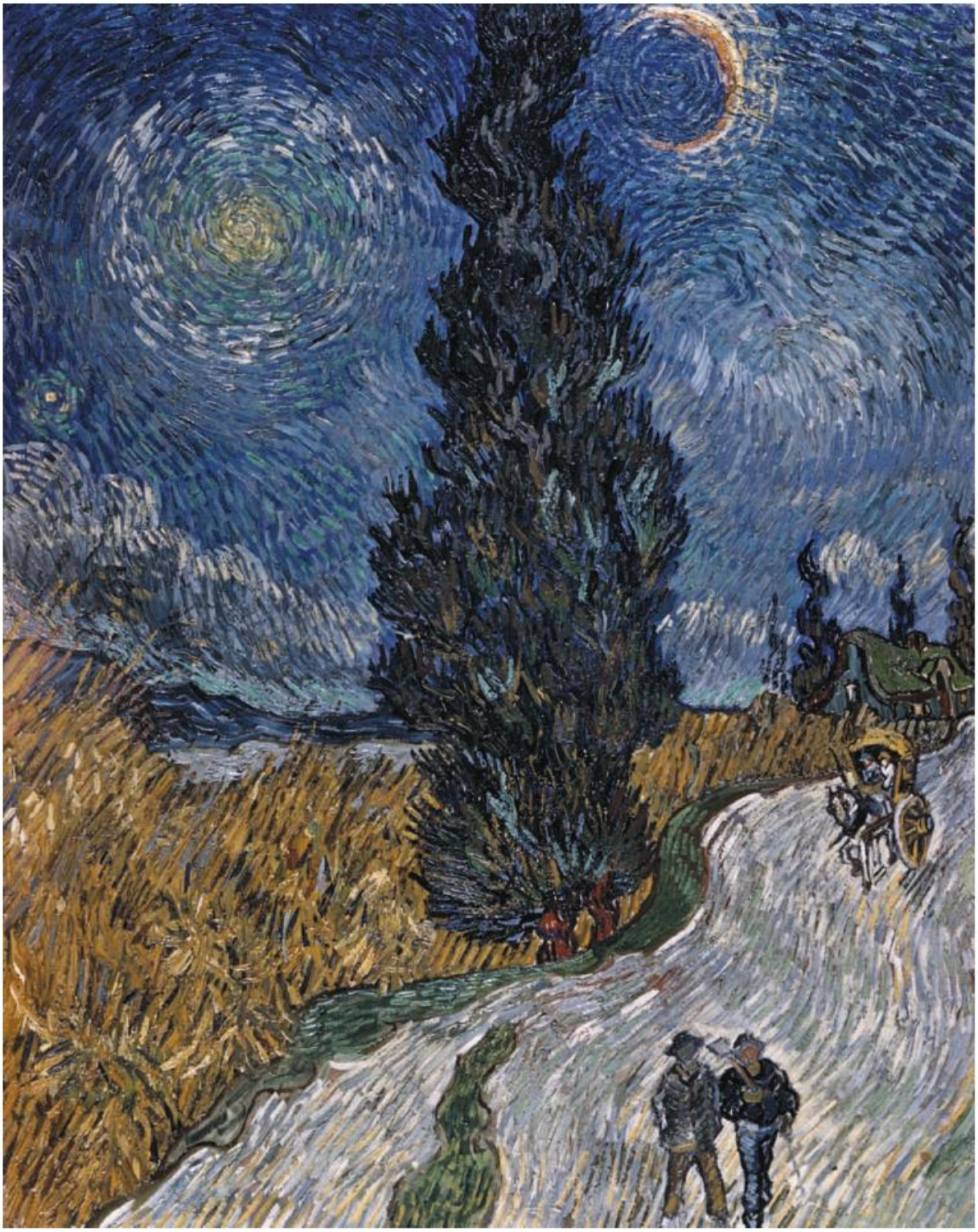
Van Gogh copied this work from a print of Newgate Prison, London, by Gustave Doré. It may have been influenced by how Van Gogh felt while a patient at the hospital in St-Rémy and by the poor condition of the other inmates. As he wrote to his brother Theo, 'My surroundings here begin to weigh on me...I can't go on, I am at the end of my patience.' However, he managed to turn his attention to his work and produced many powerful pieces during this period.

This picture certainly has an air of desperation about it, with high enclosing walls without any sense of outside light and the miserable pacing prisoners, aimlessly circling around the stone yard. The gloomy cold colours are a long way from the brilliantly-coloured paintings he had done the year before, and seems a strange choice of image to return to. He had loved engravings in his youth and he seems to be returning to this fascination by doing his representation of Doré – a renowned specialist in prints and engravings – here.



Enclosed Wheatfield with Reaper, St-Rémy 1889

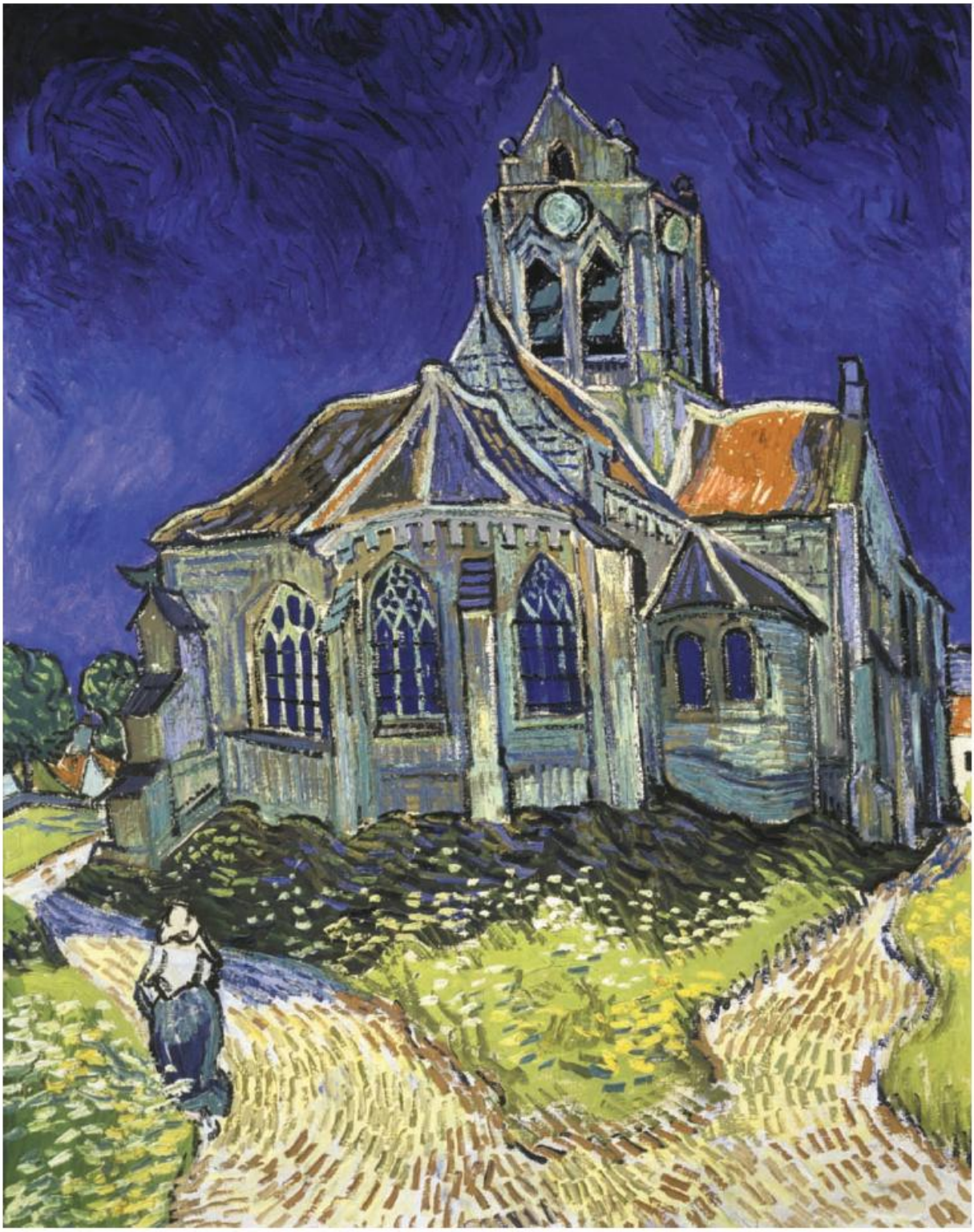
This image is symbolically opposite to Van Gogh's picture of the sower. Here the reaper works across the sun-drenched field, reaping the wheat and stacking it under a burning sun and sky. Is the reaper death? Does Van Gogh see his own demise here? Or is his concern more universal, and is he looking at the fate of all humanity falling under the scything domination of the reaper, who must finish before the day is done? In an extract from one of his letters, he clearly answers these questions: 'I am struggling with a canvas begun some days before my indisposition, a 'Reaper'; the study is all yellow, terribly thickly painted but the subject was fine and simple. For I see in this reaper – a vague figure fighting like the devil in the midst of the heat to get to the end of his task – I see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping. So it is – if you like – the opposite of that sower I tried to do before. But there's nothing sad in this death, it goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of gold.'



Road with Men Walking, Carriage, Cypress, Star and Crescent Moon, St-Rémy 1890

In this powerful painting Van Gogh combined several of his most favoured images. As he said eight years previously: 'There is something infinite in painting – I cannot explain it to you so well – but it was so delightful just for expressing one's feeling. There are hidden harmonies or contrasts in colours which involuntarily combine to work together and which could not possibly be used in another way.'

It is marvellous that his desire to paint cypress trees, those 'Egyptian obelisks' of nature; his vision of the luminous star and moon and underneath it all the swirling, writhing road; and the cornfield have been brought together in this work. Van Gogh seems to have been drawing on all his memories of previous images and created a combined icon of natural power. The colours as he said, 'involuntarily combine to work together', as if in a visionary power, out of a dream. It is the natural result of his earlier words: 'I know for sure I have an instinct for colour, and that it will come to me more and more, that painting is in the very marrow of my bones...I feel such creative power in myself that I know for sure that the time will arrive when, so to speak, I shall regularly make something good every day.' And of course, so he did, in these last two years of his life, excepting only when he was too ill to work. This swirling, intense piece of painting was produced while he was undergoing a form of convalescence at St-Rémy: creative power indeed.



The Church at Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890

When Van Gogh returned to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, he immediately began painting the local inhabitants and the surrounding area. As he wrote, '...once back here I set to work again...though the brush almost slipped from my fingers, but knowing exactly what I wanted, I have painted three more big canvases since.'

'They are vast fields of wheat under troubled skies, and I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you will see them soon? for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I almost think that these canvases will tell you what I cannot say in Words, the health and restorative forces that I see in the country.'

This canvas of the church at Auvers was painted in the summer months and Van Gogh has painted the sky the deep ultramarine that is so evident in his paintings of the south. The church itself is a solid, towering set of blocks and pyramids with deep shadow in front and sunlit paths and grass in the foreground. A small female figure in country dress walks around towards the front of the church; the view depicted by Van Gogh is of the projecting apse at the east end. The heavy dark lines outlining the architecture help to give this painting strong graphic qualities without compromising the depth and substance of the building.





Wheatfield Under Threatening Skies with Crows, Auvers-sur-Oise 1890

'What am I in most people's eyes? A nonentity, or an eccentric and disagreeable man – somebody who has no position in society and never will have, in short, the lowest of the low. Very well, even if this were true, then I should want my work to show what is in the heart of such an eccentric, of such a nobody.' This is what Van Gogh said in 1882, eight years before he painted the wheatfield seen here, considered by many to be the last painting he did before he shot himself. 'This is my ambition, which is, in spite of everything, founded less on anger than on love, more on serenity than passion. It is true that I am often in the greatest misery, but still there is a calm pure harmony and music inside me.'

This dynamic and rather disturbing picture helps to sum up the effect of Van Gogh's painting on the art-loving world. Its vigour, drama and composition are all of the greatest power and its colour contrasts are like a direct statement of his perceptiveness and intense connection with the natural world. Few of Van Gogh's contemporaries appreciated the beauty he created in his lifetime, but now the whole world places an enormous price on all his canvases, a price which would have kept him and his family for life.

It is thought that Van Gogh foresaw his own suicide in the symbolically ominous sky and the flapping black crows, but maybe we read too much into it. He may indeed have planned to kill himself before he actually attempted it, but his final letter to Theo in which he ordered new paints suggests that he planned more painting, not death. He wrote in a letter found on him at his death: 'Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it and my reason has half-foundered because of it – that's all right – but you are not among the dealers in men as far as I know, and you can still choose your side, I think, acting with humanity, but *que veux-tu*?'

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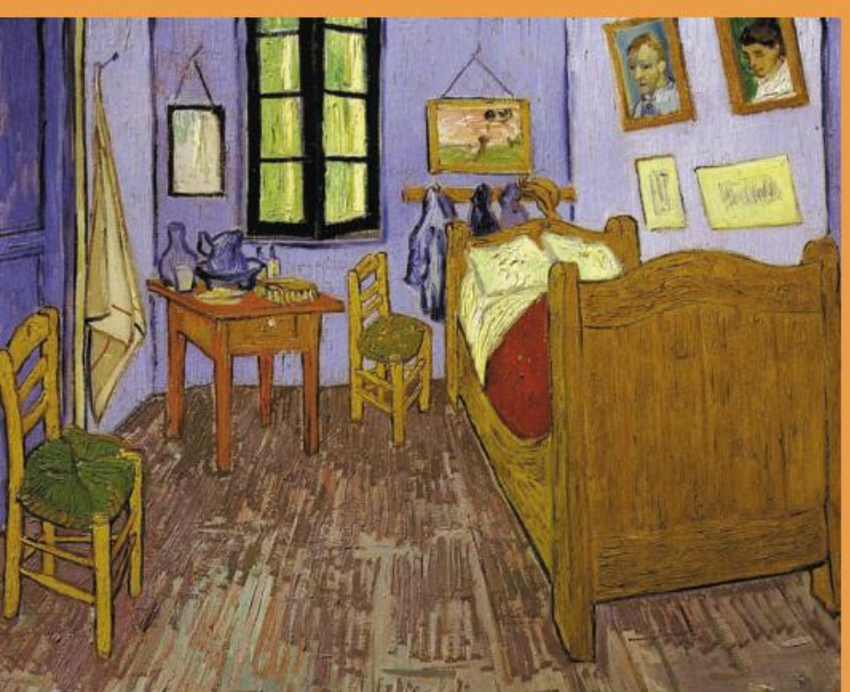
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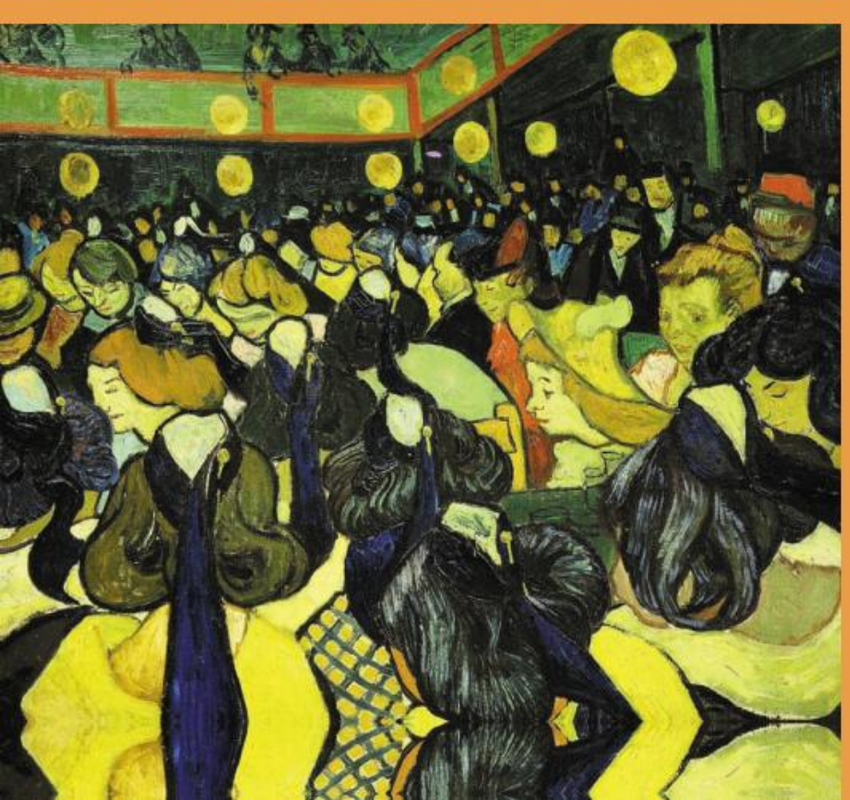
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Barrington Barber is both an author and a successful painter. His insightful commentary draws on the many letters exchanged by Vincent Van Gogh and his brother, Theo, and brings to life Vincent's extraordinary pictures by enabling us to see them through an artist's eyes.

With additional introductions by Charlotte Gerlings, *Through the Eyes of Vincent Van Gogh* is a beautiful edition on the life and work of Van Gogh, and includes the following subject chapters and images:

- EARLY EFFORTS
  includes The Loyers' House
- WORKING LIFE
  includes Women Miners
- ARTISTIC INFLUENCES
  includes The Good Samaritan
- THE SUN AND THE SOUTH
  includes Starry Night, The Yellow House
- INTIMATE SURROUNDINGS
  includes Vincent's Bedroom, Sorrow
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